

DARK PATHS

TALES OF TERROR AND HOMESPUN HORRORS



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By Greg Kay

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DEDICATION

Dark Paths is dedicated to the late, great pulp writers, Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft. There were truly giants in the earth in those days.

INTRODUCTION

There are many roads a man can walk; some of them are bright and sunlit, while others are dark as hell. The stories in this book tend to be of the latter variety.

We all walk the dark paths from time to time. Most of us walk them in our minds, but others...may not. Regardless, those paths can lead to many destinations. A dark path can carry you into the arms of a lonely vampire or into the clutches of monsters who are a bit more (or less) human than the merely undead. They can lead you from a place where the line between man and machine or killer and victim is disturbingly blurred, and into a world where love really does conquer death, although that might not be a good thing. From a raging Midwest snowstorm to a Texas desert, from an Appalachian mountain holler to a very proper English tomb, from the dangers lurking inside men's heads to those hiding in their hearts, this book is your guide. Dark paths will take you there, albeit through some unexpected and thoroughly dangerous twists and turns.

Within these pages are a baker's dozen ebony goodies to choose from, fresh from the crematory oven, decorated with spatters of red, and crafted with all the care of a psychopathic chef with a preference for unorthodox ingredients. These cookies have the faintest tang of sulfur about them. You can smell them cooking, but if you follow your nose, it might just lead you to Hell's kitchen.

Take a walk with me if you wish, but you might want to leave a light on. It's dark in here, and sometimes things tend to jump out at you.

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CORN

Damned, but the corn was growing this year.

It was more than growing; it was a thriving, living explosion of corn. As far as the eye could see in all directions, the fields stretched like a vast green sea, rippling and surging in the evening wind. Like ocean breakers, the tall stalks leaned over en masse with the gusts to hide the narrow dirt drive, and even threatened to spill across the fence into the tiny yard and engulf the dilapidated farmhouse and the old man who sat rocking on the porch. As if frustrated by their failed attempts, the plants rustled their leaves, urgently whispering to one another.

Pushing back his sun-bleached cap, the old man looked back at the corn and smiled. It had been a mighty good crop this year: the best ever. He grunted his satisfaction as he reached into the pocket of his old plaid shirt and fished out a battered pipe and tobacco. Packing it tight with a stained finger, he lit it and sat back, puffing contentedly. As the bowl warmed, he cupped his gnarled, calloused hands around the old briar and let the heat that seeped through it warm and loosen the joints: a simple pleasure, but one of the few he had left. He tried to blow a smoke ring, but the wind caught it and snatched it away before it had even begun to form.

His father wouldn't have approved. He had never had any use for man who smoked a pipe, declaring it an instrument of the devil and a sure sign of idleness.

"A pipe ain't nothing but an excuse for a lazy man. He's always lightin' it, loadin' it, or foolin' with it when he ought to be working!" he had often said.

That was as may be. Personally, the old man preferred the other proverb: that a pipe gave a wise man time to think and a fool something to stick in his mouth. He didn't know exactly just where he fell in on that scale: a little of both, maybe. But one thing was for sure: lazy, smart, or a damned fool, he had one hell of a corn crop.

The old man shivered slightly as a gust of wind penetrated his thin shirt. Although August wasn't over yet, the nights were getting cooler

and here and there the wispy cirrus clouds hung in the sky. Autumn was blowing in on the wind that came down out of Canada and across Lake Erie fifty miles to the North, autumn and harvest.

Of course either word was just a pleasanter way of saying ‘dying time.’

There’d be two harvests this year: one of the corn and the other of the old man. He instinctively knew, when everything else died this winter, he’d die with it. He knew it even without the strange pressure in his chest, and he reckoned sometimes that was just the price you paid. But at least he’d finally accomplished his purpose. He’d grown the greatest corn crop ever seen in these parts. His neighbors from miles around stopped to marvel at his accomplishment.

The bad thing is that the greatest accomplishments tend to require the greatest sacrifices.

The old man had thought he knew all about sacrifice. He’d sacrificed himself; that was for sure, spending both his youth and his middle age toiling in the fields under the watchful, hawk eyes of his father. Even when the grim patriarch finally died, he still couldn’t get away. His father was buried in the family plot right out there in the field where he could keep an eye on things, and goad his lazy boy even from his grave.

The old man snorted, then coughed as a stray puff went down the wrong way. His father couldn’t watch him now; his grave was invisible in the corn this year, and he wouldn’t be able to see for all the stalks.

How do you like that, you old bastard?

He thought he should probably feel bad for having a thought like that, but he didn’t and now he reckoned it didn’t make much difference either way. He took another leisurely puff, enjoying it while it lasted.

He knew he’d sacrificed more than his dreams and his prime years; he’d even sacrificed his own identity, growing up to become the same man his father was. He became worse if anything, as the fields began to wear and the crops began to thin in the tired soil despite his ever more desperate attempts to bend them to his will.

Then the sacrifices really began. First he’d sacrificed all three of his children – not right out, like old Abraham was going to do to Isaac. No, instead he’d done it indirectly but done it just the same: worked all the

love and all the duty right out of them until he drove them away for good. Rita went to California, Bob went New York, and Jack went to hell in a flash of fire in a Marine barracks in Beirut. Then there had been no one left but him and his wife, and he had to drive all the harder.

Still, in spite of it all, it seemed like his luck had left him – that is, if he ever had any luck to speak of in the first place. Blight and bugs and storms and just plain old worn-out dirt all took their toll. Every spring he went down to the bank and dug the hole he had made for himself a little bit deeper, and every year the smiling banker smiled less and less. The last time he hadn't smiled at all. He'd loaned the old man the money for seed, but he'd also made it abundantly clear that this was the *last* time.

The old man had felt the ghost of his father staring daggers at the back of his neck. He was going to commit the ultimate disgrace, the ultimate, absolutely unpardonable sin: he was going to lose the farm.

Then, just to top things off, he'd had the heart attack.

He rubbed his chest, grimacing at the memory. Like a lot of things in his life, that one still hurt to think about.

It was while he was laid up, trying to recover before planting time, that he finally had time to study up on things, and he came to realize something: he didn't know anything at all about sacrifice. He was like Cain, trying to give a bloodless offering, only to have it rejected out of hand. The ancient peoples had understood it took blood to appease any god or to make a deal with any spirit. That particular contract always had to be signed in red ink.

Whether it was that thought, or the increased chill of the wind as the sun dropped below the horizon of corn tassels he didn't know, but he had put off going into the dark, silent house as long as he could. Creaking to his feet and shivering with cold, he took another look at his fields, their green tinted bloody scarlet by the last of the red evening light that gashed the sky to the west.

Just as he reached for the door, an unusually strong gust parted the stalks for an instant, briefly revealing the tattered, skeletal remains of the scarecrow hidden deep within the corn, hanging forlorn and

crucified from its weathered pole, before the verdant sea of plants closed around it once more, swallowing it up and hiding it from view.

Looking in at the darkness inside his lonely home, the old man sighed and thought of his wife. She came from good, solid farming stock. He thought she...*hoped* she understood.

God, how he missed her!

Just before the screen door closed behind him, the old man took one last look with a strange mixture of triumph, sadness and resignation.

Damned, but the corn was growing this year!

RED CREEK WALTZ

The trio heaved and grunted as they dragged their prey. It had been a bad shot and a tough old buck; they had tracked him over two miles, following the blood trail completely over the mountain, and across a creek at the bottom of a deep holler where none of them had ever been before. The trip in was hard, but the trip out was even harder, dragging three hundred pounds of venison and twelve points of nice rack back through rhododendron and mountain laurel thickets. The buck had plunged deep into the branches of a fallen tree before dying, and it had taken almost half an hour of chopping, grunting, and cussing just to get him out. They finally field dressed him but knew that, once they got him back to the shallow creek, as soon as they crossed it, they had a trail that led almost straight up the side of the mountain they had just struggled their way over. Trying to save their energy, they took turns, two dragging and one walking ahead, resting.

“Good Lord, let’s stop for a minute,” Scot Donald gasped, dropping his end of the nylon rope. “I feel like I’m gonna have a heart attack.”

“You’re the one who shot the damned thing,” Joe Bob McKenzie grumbled in return, although he dropped his own end without hesitation and bent over, hands on his knees, breathing deeply.

The young man in front – Jake Estep - turned back and took a step towards them.

“One of you all need me to spell you awhile?”

They both shook their heads.

The three were much alike: all of them eighteen, with the hard leanness of active youth. They had known one another all their lives. Living in Yancey’s Knob, the same little mountain town where they had been born and gone to school, the trio had become so inseparable that folks jokingly referred to them as ‘the three musketeers’ and remarked on it when they saw one without the others.

That was all about to change; Scot was engaged and would be married the first of December, Joe Bob was leaving for Paris Island in two weeks, and Jake was going to work in the mines as soon as deer

season was over. They all swore it didn't matter, but inside they knew better. Instinctively, they knew this might very well be their last hunt together.

At least it had been a memorable one.

Maybe a little too memorable; the effort had soaked them all with sweat. Now the sun was going down, and the cold, late November wind was developing a distinct chill. Jake looked up at the sky, scanning it with concern.

"Boys, we may not get out of this holler tonight."

"Aw hell!" Scot took off his cap and slapped it against his thigh in disgust. "I told Becky I'd call her when I got home. She's going to be pissed!"

"Pussy-whipped already," Joe Bob ribbed him. "Buy yourself a cell phone."

"What for? You know they won't work down in these hollers. I reckon you're gonna hear it from your mama too for stayin' out all night and missing church tomorrow, unless I miss my guess."

The other boy muttered a curse, knowing his friend was right. They were all going to catch hell from somebody when they finally made it home.

"Let's at least try. If we can just get up over the mountain, it'll be downhill all the way."

"I don't think we're gonna do it," Jake told him. "Take a look at those clouds."

Silently they gazed skyward in the fading light. The clouds were black and pregnant, and from the feel of the wind, they were going to have rain or, much more likely, snow, probably within a few minutes.

"So, what are we gonna do?" There was no fear in the words; all three of the boys knew how to survive. However, they also had a very real respect for the mountain weather that had the very real potential of being fatal if taken for granted. "I hate to leave this deer; maybe we can quarter him up and at least take part of him."

Jake shook his head, still studying the threatening clouds.

"I don't think it would matter. It looks like it's gonna be on us way before we get to the top, deer or not, and it looks like it's gonna be a

big one. I reckon we'd better shelter here in this holler, and get a fire goin'. Any of you all ever been over here before?"

They both shook their heads, and Scot suddenly spoke up.

"I heard one time back when I was a kid that there used to be an old mining town just on the other side of this mountain, up towards the head of a big holler. I'll bet it's this one. Shoot, if it is, it can't be more than a few hundred yards away."

"I hope so," Joe Bob said, clutching himself and shivering briefly. "Maybe we can find an old building or a mine shaft or something to at least keep the wind off and keep us dry."

Jake nodded.

"Sounds like a plan. Let me spell you awhile on that rope, Scot."

The distance was only half of what they thought; a few short minutes later their flashlight beams picked up an empty house foundation with trees as thick as their thighs growing up inside its short stone walls.

"Damn, I hope there's more left of the rest of it," Joe Bob muttered.

Jake caught his breath and pointed his flashlight at a pair of parallel depressions in the ground, winding their way up the holler. The path was faint, and trees as large as those in the foundation were growing up in it.

"That must be the road to it."

Scot looked at the overgrown way doubtfully. "Looks like it's been a while since it's been used."

"I reckon-" A sprinkling noise caused him to stop and hold out his hand, and tiny a tiny ice ball bounced in it, followed by a droplet of water that felt just as cold. "Sleet. It's a damned ice storm! We'd best get a move on; if we don't find shelter in a few minutes, we're going to have to build a lean-to or something."

Heaving on ropes, they hurried on, but hadn't gone more than a few yards when Scot exclaimed, "Look!"

They raised their heads and saw a light flickering through the branches just up the road.

"Somebody's up there," Scot pointed out needlessly. "I wonder who it is?"

“I don’t much care who it is,” Jake told him, “as long as they’ve got some place to get inside.”

The mixture of sleet and rain was beginning to coat the leaves by the time they reached the house, an old but tidy miner’s cabin set incongruously amongst the ruins of its neighbors. The light that flickered in the window had the pale, yellowish quality that indicated kerosene rather than electricity. They had just dragged the deer off the path and into the yard when the door opened, throwing a rectangle of light onto the ground.

“Who’s out there?”

The three boys gaped in surprise. Not only was the tall, blonde girl strikingly beautiful, but the illumination behind her shone through the thin, old-fashioned cotton dress she wore, showing the outline of her flawless body so perfectly it left little to the imagination.

Jake was first to recover his voice.

“We’re deer hunters, ma’am. We shot one on the other side of the mountain and tracked it over here, but we got caught by the storm. Could we use your phone, please?”

They heard other voices coming from inside, both feminine and masculine.

“You all better come on in before you freeze,” the girl told them in a tone as creamy as a seductive piece of music while she pushed the door wider.

Dropping the drag ropes and leaving the buck lying in the yard, they quickly complied, almost falling over one another in their haste to get in. They hadn’t realized just how cold they were until they saw the warm glow of the house.

Inside, the boys were surprised to see two more girls, dressed in the same style and not differing in looks from the first by more than an inch in height and a shade or two of blonde hair. None of them looked to be under sixteen, but neither could any of them have seen her twentieth birthday, and the boys would have been hard put to pick out the eldest, they were so much alike. There was also an older man, about sixty, seated on a crude wooden chair at the scarred kitchen table. His hair and beard were dark and shot through with gray, and besides a

plain white shirt, he sported a pair of patched, well-worn trousers and heavy boots.

“Come on in, boys; you’re letting all the warm air out.”

Gratefully they crossed the threshold into the warmth provided by the blazing logs in the fireplace.

“Thank you, sir,” Jake told him, trying not to ogle the first girl who had come up a little closer beside him than convention normally allowed. She was actually touching him as she intently looked into his face, studying him closely. Evidently she liked what she saw, because she smiled with what looked for all the world like satisfaction. “Sorry to bother you, but could we use your phone to call home, maybe get some of our family to come and help us get this deer back over the mountain?”

The girls’ laughter was like tinkling bells, and the old man chuckled.

“Sorry, son, ain’t got no phone, nor electric neither. They never ran ‘em up this holler.”

Jake heard Scot swear under his breath in frustration behind him, and one of the other girls laid a slender, long-fingered hand on his arm in sympathy.

“Well sir, is there anywhere around here we can get some shelter till morning, or at least until this storm blows over?”

The man’s beard twitched slightly with his tight smile.

“This is the only shelter here; last place left in town with a roof on ‘er. You all are gonna have to stay with us.”

“We don’t want to put you out ...”

“You ain’t putting nobody out; there’s plenty of room, long as you don’t mind the floor.”

Jake looked back at the other boys who gave him exhausted nods of agreement.

“Well, thank you kindly, sir; we really appreciate it.”

The man waved his gratitude away.

“Glad to have you, son. We don’t get many visitors up here.”

There were introductions all around; the man’s name was Jenkins, and the girls – all his daughters – were Susie, Kate and Elizabeth.

“You all just stand your guns over in the corner there. Girls, where’re your manners? Take these boys’ coats and boots off and put them by the fire so they’ll dry out.”

Much to their surprise and embarrassment, the sisters helped them out of their coats, before making them sit on a long, split-log bench by the door while they unlaced and pulled off their ice-covered boots for them.

“Damn,” Scot whispered under his breath to the others while the girls carried out their father’s instructions, “I could get used to this.”

“Yeah, and Becky’ll get used to your ass if she ever finds out,” Joe Bob retorted in an equally low whisper, making Scot’s ears redden. Elizabeth looked up and smiled knowingly, as if she had heard every word.

They sat there uncomfortably for a few moments in their sock feet, unsure of what to say. Jenkins grinned again and stretched as he reached behind him into a battered cabinet standing by the table.

“I’ve got a little something that’ll take the chill off you.”

The boys stared at the Mason jar of clear liquid knowing instinctively what it was. Even though it usually cost more and tasted worse than store-bought, moonshine was still an institution and right of passage in the mountains.

Susie took the jar from her father and carried it to Jake, who hesitated.

“This’ll put some hair on your chest,” she teased before Kate added, much to their shock, “and lead in your pencil!” The girls giggled and, while most fathers would have been aghast and probably unbuckling their belts at that point, the old man just laughed heartily at their forwardness.

Never one to refuse a challenge, especially with his friends’ eyes on him, watching to see what he would do, Jake unscrewed the lid and took a cautious sip. The raw whiskey burned like liquid fire down his throat, but had just enough smoothness to it to prevent him from embarrassing himself by coughing.

He looked at the jar, then took another, deeper sip and sighed appreciatively.

“Mr. Jenkins, this is mighty good.”

The man nodded, and Joe Bob elbowed his friend un-gently in the ribs.

“Doggone it, Jake, don’t hog it all now!”

The jar made the trip back and forth, and each time it passed, it tasted better and better. Before they knew it, the container was empty and they had a warm feeling stealing through them. The old man passed them another jar wordlessly.

“You boys like music?” he asked by the time they were halfway through it.

“Yessir we do,” Scot told him, his speech a little too loud and slightly slurred.

“Well then.” Jenkins reached into the same cabinet and this time brought out a fiddle and bow. After making a couple of scrapes and adjusting the tuning, he began to play.

The tune was a sort of mountain bluegrass, only older and wilder, that had a clear connection to its roots in the misty Celtic isles across the sea. As one the girls stood and began to dance, their bare feet light on the rough plank floor as they clogged almost silently. Caught up in the music, they tossed their heads, swirling their long hair while their full breasts bounced and swayed. As they moved back and forth in front of the fire, the backlight made it obvious that there was nothing beneath any of their dresses except themselves. The boys watched in single-minded awe, nodding their heads and tapping their feet in time, unwilling and unable to look away.

Seamlessly Jenkins switched from a fast reel to a slow waltz and the three friends, fired by lust and moonshine, carelessly set the half-empty second jar on the bench and joined the girls, not noticing the container as it rolled off and spilled its contents onto the floor.

Jake took Susie or she took him – he didn’t know which – and began to dance. It took a minute for him to realize that she was smiling devilishly while she pressed he breasts against his chest so hard he could feel her stiffening nipples through their clothes. Seeing the look on his face, she ground her pelvis against him with such obvious desire it made him feel dizzy and ready to explode. All the while her beautiful eyes seemed reached out to him.

As they turned to the music, he noticed Scot and Kate were no longer dancing; instead they were tangled in the corner, on the floor. Becky away over the mountain and long forgotten, Scot had his mouth on Kate's and one hand up her dress while she wrapped both bare, muscular legs around the small of his back.

Jake had just enough sobriety left to fear, and glanced at Jenkins only to find the girls' father laughing out loud at the sight, and playing faster and faster.

Joe Bob never looked up from his moving embrace with Elizabeth as they kissed and gnawed and pawed at one another like each one was coated with candy.

The room seemed to be spinning and growing darker, and the music was going faster still, as Susie deliberately took Jake's hand and slid it down to clutch her slender rear. Needing little encouragement, he groped the tight muscles, squeezing and kneading, and she groaned in ecstasy, grinding against him even more fervently. Her body gave off heat like a furnace and he could feel it against his own groin like a fire.

She began turning faster now, taking the lead.

They turned and he saw Scot suddenly stiffen on top of Kate. His head was thrown back, eyes wide and mouth gaping, while her face was buried in his neck. Her arms and legs held him tightly to her, pumping against him.

They turned in time for him to see Elizabeth open her mouth wide, too wide, and sink a pair of long fangs into Joe Bob's throat.

They turned and there sat Mr. Jenkins, his own fangs bared in a snarling smile of triumph as his bow furiously hissed across the strings like a wild thing.

They turned and Jake saw Susie's eyes reflecting the firelight like an animal, pulling him in. She dipped her head and he felt the first sweet sting as she broke the skin.

Then he accidentally set his foot on the fallen whiskey jar. It rolled beneath him and he stumbled from her grasp, falling into the corner and sending the rifles clattering to the floor.

The spell broken, he suddenly *saw*.

Scot was limp and white and dead on top of Kate, his jaw hanging slack and his eyes wide and set, and still she clung and pumped her hips

as she worried his neck like a dog on a bone. She sucked so desperately she choked once, blood briefly squirting out of her nose, but never interrupted her feeding.

The only thing holding Joe Bob up was Elizabeth's unnaturally strong arms. Her cheeks worked in and out like a bellows and her throat moved in rhythm to the music as she sucked and swallowed while a thin scarlet thread trickled unheeded down her chin. Joe Bob's hands still clutched at her, squeezing and caressing feebly.

Susie was reaching for him, her eyes blazing like coals and her mouth stretched impossibly wide, showing the glistening ivory spears inside while Jenkins shouted encouragement, urging her on.

Jake's hands closed around one of the guns – his own .30-30, and he jerked it up and squeezed the trigger. He fired from the hip and kept firing, working the lever action like a mad man. Susie's dress fluttered under the impact of the copper-jacketed slugs, and she shrieked in anger and hunger, and flung herself at him. By raw instinct, he hit her hard across the face with the stock and knocked her to one side, sending her sprawling halfway across the room. Lurching to his feet, he saw his way clear to the door, and was almost to it when her weight, launched by her powerful legs, slammed hard onto his back.

The impact carried them both headlong into the door, and they shattered the rotten panels and rolled out into the ice-covered yard in a shower of splinters. Susie's fangs scored his neck once again before she bounced loose and was brought up short by the deer carcass. Still warm, the scent of blood from the field-dressed buck's opened belly puffed out so strongly even Jake could smell it, and the girl instinctively turned towards the odor, gnashing and snapping for a fleeting instant. Sobered by cold air and sheer terror, Jake leaped to his stocking feet and ran as the sleet pelted down on him, stinging him through his shirt.

Behind him he heard Jenkins shouting in anger at Susie, then two sets of feet pounding after him, crunching on the ice.

By now he was running without reason, in a blind panic over being the victim of the impossible, wanting only to get away. As the sounds of pursuit grew louder and closer, he ignored the cold, ignored the

snags and briars that tore his feet, ignored everything except his own fear.

He heard a shout of rage almost in his ear and something ripped his back as he stumbled into the shallow creek, his feet crashing through the still forming scum of ice and tripping him. For the first time, he found voice enough to scream as he felt himself falling helplessly onto the far bank. Rolling onto his back, he desperately flung his arms out in a futile attempt to ward them off, only to encounter nothing.

They stood on the opposite bank, Susie and her father, watching him. The old man dropped a piece of bloody cloth he had ripped from the back of Jake's shirt with his hard nails, and the girl's eyes were desperate and tear-filled.

"Come back, Jake. Please come back to me."

Jenkins looked equally desperate.

"Come on back, boy; you'll freeze to death out here. You know you'll never make it over the mountain in this cold, with no coat or shoes, miles from nowhere. Come on back; I've got some more shine. We can sit down in the cabin where it's warm and talk it over."

"Please, Jake!" she begged as she unconsciously inched a bare foot towards the running water, only to quickly jerk it back as if it were scalding hot. She suddenly ripped her dress off and stood naked, a white flame in the night. Her nipples hardened in the cold and he felt drawn to her like a moth to a light. "You can have me if you just come back. It'll be good; I'll make it good for you, Jake. I'll love you! Please!"

Their eyes glowed like coals, and seemed to tug at him, weakening his will. He slowly rose to his feet, his lips quivering with cold, fear, and a level of desire he had never imagined possible.

"Come on, Jake. It's only a couple of steps, and you can be warm again. We can be together forever if you want. I love you, Jake. I love you!"

She moved again and the dress hanging from her grasp passed across a patch of ice-covered ground. He could see the white through the bullet holes he had put in the cloth.

There were no corresponding marks on her body.

The compulsion broken, he turned and ran, her voice ringing in his ears as the sound followed him up the mountain.

“Please Jake! Oh please Jake! Come back! *Pleasepleaseplease!*”

Miles away, near the little town of Yancey’s Knob, an old woman suddenly woke screaming. After she caught her breath, she began desperately praying as she dialed the phone beside her bed.

Frank Estep stood beside his son’s truck and fired a quick three shots in the air for the third time in fifteen minutes. Like before he listened closely, but there was no answering report. He was beginning to worry; the boys’ truck was here, so they couldn’t be out of hearing range of a .30-’06 on foot, surely, and they knew the universal hunter’s distress signal.

Why the hell don’t they fire an answering shot?

Frank had not been overly worried at first. A little concerned, of course, but he had taught his son well, and knew Tim Donald and Joe Bob’s late father Mike had done the same. They were probably holed up somewhere up on the mountain, waiting for the weather to break so they could get back down. They had done it once before, so he put a brave face on it for his wife and told her what was most probably the truth, that there was nothing to worry about.

That was before he got the call from his grandmother.

She was pushing ninety, but still sharp as a tack. The thing was, she also had a feeling for omens that most people didn’t know existed. She knew when the slate fall crushed and killed her husband in the mine at the time it happened, hours before the company sent anyone to tell her the bad news. Before the police had a chance to call, she had known something had happened to Frank when, as her teenaged grandson, he was in Jeff Carter’s car when it went off the road and over the mountainside, killing Jeff along with Ben Clonch, and leaving him pinned helplessly in the wreck with both legs broken. So when she called him and said something bad had happened to Jake this time, something *real* bad, and that his son needed him, Frank dropped everything and went out into the storm.

He pressed the button to illuminate his watch. That had been almost five hours ago: three driving around to find Jake's truck and two more of waiting, signaling, and hoping. Now it was 3:38 in the morning, and the damned ice was still coming down, forming a dangerous crust on the road and everything else. If – no, he corrected himself, *when* – he found them, he wasn't at all sure they would be able to make it back down the road, even in four wheel drive.

He grabbed the latch on his own truck door, and had to jerk it hard to break the ice that was building up, bridging the gaps between it and the cab, and holding it closed. Worried sick and having tried everything else he knew, he reached inside and flipped the lights on and off rapidly.

His heart leapt as he sensed as much as heard his son's faint cry echo from far up on the mountain.

It took him nearly an hour to reach Jake. His legs aching and lungs burning in the cold air, slipping, sliding and falling more than once, Frank Estep refused to slow his uphill pace. Finally he pushed his way through a patch of rhododendron and gasped at what he saw. His boy was out in the middle of an ice storm, in nothing but a tattered and bloody shirt and pants. His socks were worn to bands around his ankles above his bare, bleeding feet, and his hair was frozen in spikes on his head. Jake's face was deathly pale and his eyes wild, and he cried, "*Daddy!*" before collapsing into his father's arms.

"Frank?"

He looked up from the uncomfortable plastic chair where he sat beside his sobbing wife in the Emergency Waiting Room, and into the worried eyes of Scot Donald's father.

"Tim."

Tim Donald's lips writhed as if in pain, and it took him a moment to speak.

"What happened up there? Where's my boy?"

Frank shook his head.

"I don't know. Jake – Jake hasn't regained consciousness yet, but he'd walked a long way."

"How is he?"

"I don't know. They say he's hypothermic, frost bit, and something tore him up some: bit his throat and clawed his back."

"A bear maybe?"

"I don't know," he helplessly repeated again. "I just don't know."

The outer doors opened in a rush of cold air to admit a tall and gaunt old man in a set of insulated hunting coveralls. He spotted the two boys' parents and paused only long enough to stomp the ice off his boots on the mat before going to them.

Frank stood up.

"Reverend McDermitt."

"Frank, Mr. Donald." He put his hand on Tim Donald's shoulder. "I heard what happened. I've spoken to the sheriff as well as calling all the men in the church. They're rounding up every four-wheel drive and ATV they can get their hands on right now, and we'll start searching for your boy as soon as it gets light enough to see. The storm's letting up, and they called the state boys and got the plow working on opening up the road. We'll find him and the McKenzie boy too. My wife's with his mother right now."

He turned to Frank, and Jake's father saw something in his eyes that bothered him, like the man of God had something to hide. Even though his son, at least, was still alive, Frank was suddenly very, very afraid.

"Has Jake told you where they were?"

"No sir," he said, shaking his head.

"Then I reckon we'd better pray for his recovery."

"Reverend," Tim asked, desperation evident in his voice, "could you pray for my son Scot too?"

In response, the preacher pulled off his cap, revealing a head of still thick, snow-white hair.

"Yes sir, and we'll pray for the other boy as well. God can hear and answer just as easy, no matter how many we pray for."

They all bowed their heads and Reverend McDermitt prayed sincerely, but it was little comfort, and he saw it when he raised his head and opened his eyes.

They turned as one when a set of interior doors opened and the doctor motioned them in.

Jake finished speaking and a nurse had injected a sedative into his IV to make him sleep a full five minutes ago, but no one in the stunned gathering had spoken a word since. Finally it was the doctor who broke the silence.

“I’d say it’s the moonshine and shock, maybe combined with street drugs – probably LSD or some other psychedelic. The boys got hold of a bad batch, and Jake is hallucinating.”

“My boy doesn’t do drugs,” Frank told him flatly, “and it wasn’t any ‘hallucination’ that made those marks on his back and neck.”

The doctor simply gave him a skeptical look before leaving the room.

Jake’s father dropped his head and pinched the skin between his eyes in frustration and fatigue. Besides being up all night and climbing almost halfway up the mountain, he had carried his semi-conscious son back down, and he was starting to feel it.

“Jake told you the truth, you know,” Reverend McDermitt said quietly.

“I know he thinks that’s what he saw –”

The preacher shook his head.

“That *is* what he saw. Those...*things* have been there since before the depression. That’s why Red Creek died; they killed it.”

“Red Creek?”

“That’s what the coal camp was called.”

Frank and Tim looked at one another.

“We’ve never heard of it.”

“You weren’t meant to. The folks around here back then thought if they told what was down there, people would get curious and go see for themselves, and eventually something like this would happen. Nobody knows except those who were here then, or preachers like me. The story’s been passed down to every pastor here after he swears not to tell. Otherwise, we thought it was something best forgotten, and if people left it alone long enough, it would just fade away with time like haunts generally tend to do.” He looked at his boots and heaved a heavy sigh. “Looks like we were wrong. God forgive us.”

“My boy...” Tim began, the full implications finally hitting him.

“We’ll do what we can, Mr. Donald.” He glanced at his watch. “Let’s get on up there; it’ll be light soon.”

“What I want to know,” Frank asked a few minutes later, “is where they came from in the first place.”

The preacher answered him over of the engine’s roar as they bounced and slid up the icy clay and shale of the red-dog road, part of a caravan of searchers.

“Nobody knows for sure. It was just a miner – a widower – and his daughters. The story is that there was a big slip one night during a heavy rainstorm, and a wall of mud and rock came down the mountain right on top of their cabin. They dug them out, but they never had a chance.

“They buried them in the camp graveyard and the company rebuilt the house and put another miner and his family in it.

“Three days later all of them – both parents and two children – were found dead in their beds. They were just the first. Pretty soon someone was dying almost every night.

“Before long, the deaths even started happening in the day time, only down in the mine, in the dark. Men would be found bled clear out, or just disappear. The company tried to hush it up, but you can’t hide something like that. They brought in mine guards and detectives, and they died just like the rest.

“Within a year, half the town was dead. The company packed up and left, and so did the people. A forest fire swept through the area back in ’58 and burnt the whole place I reckon. Nobody’s been there since, until last night.”

Three hours later, a dozen men, armed to the teeth, crossed Red Creek, and Frank Estep immediately stooped down and pointed at a rag of bloodstained plaid cloth on the frozen ground. He had to pull it hard before the ice finally let it go.

“Look here; it’s part of Jake’s shirt, just like he said.”

Tim swore violently despite the Reverend’s presence, who was far too much of a practical man to blame him anyway.

“Which way do we look first?”

“The coal camp’s that way,” the preacher told him, pointing up the holler.

Following the overgrown road, they began seeing the old house foundations, and one of the men suddenly called out. Gathering where he pointed, they saw the massive, gutted buck lying frozen to the ground where the boys had left it, mute testimony that yet another part of the story was true.

“Now wait a minute,” Tim said suddenly. “Jake said they fell out the door right on top of the deer, but there’s no house here, just this old foundation.”

Without a word, Reverend McDermitt walked up to the knee-high stone wall and gingerly stepped inside it.

“They were here.”

Silently they gathered and stared at the rifles lying amongst the trees and dead weeds growing up inside the empty foundation, and at the empty .30-30 cartridges scattered on the ground. Over by the cold, half-collapsed chimney were three coats and three pair of boots, crusted with ice, and an unbroken pair of mason jars lay nearby. Frank picked one up and sniffed.

“Whiskey.” He held it up and the light shone clear through the dregs in the bottom. “Moonshine whiskey.”

Tim Donald turned his head so the others couldn’t see his tears.

Hopelessly, they searched the ruined mining camp for the rest of the day, but there was nothing to find beyond the overgrown wreckage of the past. Finally it was Reverend McDermitt who put his hand on Tim’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Donald, but it’s time to go. It’s getting dark, and it won’t do to be here then.”

He just nodded numbly.

They splashed across Red Creek just as the sun disappeared behind the mountain, and Frank asked the preacher a question that had been bothering him.

“Why didn’t they follow Jake over here?”

“Their kind can’t cross running water. There’re branches on either side of this holler – spring-fed. They run all year.”

“Good thing,” he muttered, and then suddenly stopped as he glanced behind them.

“We’ve got company.”

Susie stood there on the bank, looking at them with longing. Elizabeth, Kate and their father were with her, and beside them stood Joe Bob McKenzie and Scot Donald on the icy ground, still in their socks and shirts.

“Scot!” Tim shouted and started for him, but Frank grabbed him.

“No!”

“Daddy!” Scot called out, stretching his arms towards them, and his father shoved Frank aside hard enough to knock him down as he broke away and plunged back across the stream.

“Son!” he yelled and threw his arms around the boy. From across the creek they saw Scot’s eyes glow in the gathering darkness, and he opened his mouth to show his teeth, just before he sank them into his father’s throat. Tim jerked back his head in panic and the others moved in quickly, grabbing him and opening their own mouths.

There was a single gunshot and Tim Donald collapsed with the high-powered rifle bullet through his skull, dead before he hit the ground. Reverend McDermitt stood there without expression, the faintest wisp of smoke curling from his muzzle, as the cries of rage echoed from across the creek.

“Preacher!” Frank stared as shock piled upon shock. “You killed him!”

The pastor simply looked at him, a sickly calm on his face.

“I’m in the business of saving souls, Mr. Estep, and I just saved one. Think of it as ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ I pray that, if I were ever in Mr. Donald’s place, someone would have the mercy to shoot me before they could take me.”

“You all think you’re so damned smart!” Susie hissed across the water, baring her fangs and pointing at Frank. “We might not have this one, but I’ll have your son! I’ll have Jake; I’ve marked him and he’s mine!”

Frank felt the rifle buck against his shoulder again and again, but the girl never changed expression as the bullets ripped through her.

“We’re bound! I can’t come to him,” she continued, “but someday he’ll come to me!”

Jake watched Susie approach the water with a mixture of desire and terror. She was naked on the bank of Red Creek once more, and his eyes devoured her perfect body. She stood and opened his arms.

“I love you, Jake. Please come to me. Please.”

He knew better, but his feet seemed to have taken on a life of their own, propelling him forward into the stream, step by step.

“Please,” he begged, tears flowing from his eyes. “Please don’t!”

“Shh.” Her voice was soothing. “Come a little closer, and we can be together forever. I love you, Jake Estep. I love you.”

Something in her voice gave him no room for doubt that she meant it, and instead of reassuring him, it horrified him all the more. Unable to resist, he crossed the creek with reluctant, jerking steps. Once on the other side, he took her in his arms and held her close for a long moment. She turned up her face with those strange glowing eyes, and he kissed her. Finally pulling his lips away, Jake tilted his head back against his will, baring his own throat to her.

“Please! I don’t want to!”

Her voice was sad and sweet.

“I know.”

He closed his eyes tightly but didn’t resist as he felt her fangs slide through his skin like deliciously hot little knives.

Jake jerked out of sleep into a sitting position, his right hand clutched against his throat. In a blind panic he thrashed wildly, lost for a moment until he recognized the dim light and white walls of his hospital room.

Gasping for breath, he felt tears made both of fear and disappointment trickle down his cheeks. For the first time since he was a child, he put his face in his hands, curled into a ball and cried miserably. It would not be the last.

It was eight years before Jake Estep stood on the banks of the little run called Red Creek once again, alone this time. He limped slightly now, the result of three toes on his right foot and one on his left taken

by the frostbite he got during his last visit. His shoulders sagged, and in the gathering twilight, he looked much older than his twenty-six years.

Standing by herself on the other side, Susie hadn't aged a day.

"You knew I'd come back, didn't you?"

She nodded, both sympathy and hunger in her sad eyes.

"I knew."

"I don't understand it. I tried to get on with my life; I really tried. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep...I couldn't hold an interest in anything. I lost my job, lost my truck, lost...I couldn't even love."

"You already love, Jake. So do I."

"Yeah, I know. That's the problem. There ain't no gettin' away from it I don't reckon."

She shook her head.

"No, there ain't. It's not so bad, you know."

"Really?"

Susie paused and dropped her eyes.

"No, not really. It's – it's not good."

"I suppose not," he said with a sigh, then looked past her. "Where are the others?"

"This doesn't involve them. This is just between you and me.

"We're bound, Jake Estep. There ain't nothing either one of us can do about it now. I wish there was, but..."

"You mean I'm bound."

She shook her head again, looking straight into his eyes.

"I mean *we're* bound, the both of us. You were special; I knew it when I chose you that night. That's *why* I chose you, and once I-I bit you, there wasn't any going back for either one of us. It's an unbreakable bond."

"But what's so different about me and those others you killed here, back when the town was still alive? I don't see any of them still walking around."

"It's like the difference between having sex and making love. Sometimes we feed just to satisfy our flesh, but once in a while it's special, because it's the only way to consummate our love down to the last full measure and bind us together as one. 'Flesh of one flesh', ain't that what they say? Can you understand that?"

“I think so. Yeah, I reckon I can.”

“You know how much you want me?” He nodded, all too aware of the consuming obsession that she had become. “I’ve got it just as hard, Jake. I want you just as bad, only it’s worse for me.”

“How do you figure?”

“I really do love you, and I don’t want to do what I’ll have to so we can be together.” There were tears running down her face now, and her voice was a sob. “I’m so sorry! I’d let you go if I could! I don’t want you to have to live like this!”

He mulled it over for a few minutes, during which neither of them spoke.

“I suppose – aw hell, I love you too. I must; I’ve thought about you every day for the past eight years. Damn it, I’ve made love to you in my dreams every single night! So, what happens if I come over there?”

“You know what’ll happen. I can’t help that; it’s what I am. Afterwards, though, we can be together. I’ll love you forever, Jake.”

He set a boot in the stream, ignoring the cold water spilling over his ankle.

“Will it hurt?”

She nodded.

“A little bit, but I’ll hold you and love you while I do it. I’ll make it as easy as I can. I promise.”

He continued walking, crossing the stream until he stood unprotected before her.

“I guess I’m yours.”

“I know.” She opened her arms. “Come here Jake; come and love me.”

He came into her arms and kissed her. Off somewhere behind the trees, he heard a mountain fiddle start a slow, sad waltz.

THE DECEIVER

Lord Masterson had been warned that India could kill a man, and now that he was here, he believed it entirely. He hated the place, hated the heat like an oven's open door and the flies that swarmed and flocked in a great army crawling in iridescent uniforms. He hated the black-skinned natives with their incomprehensible jabbering and he hated to smell of sweat, sewage, and rot. He hated the country's heathen gods...them maybe most of all.

He hated everything about India, which was precisely why he had expended a prodigious amount of capital, both political and financial, in order to get there.

He looked up from his desk at the sound of a rap on his office door. "Come in."

The door opened and admitted a British officer, proper in every respect – almost. As far as Masterson could see, everything was in place, from the polished boots to the immaculately tailored red jacket to the freshly combed red hair and well-waxed moustache, yet something seemed somehow wrong. Despite the military step and the razor-sharp creases, something was, well, *relaxed* about the man in the manner that every thing in this cursed country was relaxed, as if it had wilted in the heat. Lord Masterson couldn't quite put his finger on it.

He was honest enough to allow that the problem might well be within his own mind, a product both of the heat that seemed almost visible like a fog, and of his own dislike of the place. As the man snapped to attention before the desk and saluted with all the crispness of a London parade ground, Masterson decided the problem must lie within himself after all, and was not particularly surprised by that minor revelation.

"Major Tristram reporting, my lord!"

Lord Masterson returned the salute as he stood, then offered his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Major."

“The pleasure is mine, my lord,” the officer told him as he returned the handshake with a firm, strong, and precisely proper grasp. “Welcome to India.”

Masterson thanked him and gestured towards the guest’s chair, exchanging a few more pleasantries as they took their seats. The Major readily accepted a good cigar and two fingers of French cognac before his eyes strayed to the ceiling and the motionless fan there, its pull string hanging slack between it and the tiny hole in the wall it disappeared into.

“I say, my lord, it appears your fan boy has wandered away. Shall I fetch him back for you?”

“No, Major, that won’t be necessary. He didn’t wander away; I sent him away.”

Looking with concern at the rivulets of sweat running down Masterson’s face and neck, soaking his collar, Tristram remarked, “I beg your pardon, my lord, but do you think that’s wise? The heat here is barely tolerated by the natives; it can be plainly dangerous to those who are not yet acclimated.”

“There are things here far more dangerous than the heat, sir, and I want no audience while I discuss them with you. I suspect my brother may have voiced them to you already.”

Major Tristram looked blankly at him, his puzzlement obvious.

“Your brother, my lord? I don’t believe I’ve had the honor of making the gentleman’s acquaintance.”

It was Masterson’s turn to look confused.

“But I understood you served under him.”

“Not that I recall, my lord; I last served under the late Lord Pennel, the last district governor.”

“Ah!” Masterson exclaimed. “The fault for the confusion is mine, sir; Lord Pennel was my half-brother, but we were so close we always thought of one another as much nearer. I still do, even now.”

Tristram’s mouth actually hung open in surprise for an instant before he recovered his composure.

“I didn’t know! Lord Masterson, please allow me to extend my sincere condolences.”

“Thank you, Major, and please allow me to equally extend my thanks in return. I understand it was you who recovered his body at some risk to yourself, and saw it shipped home, allowing him to have a Christian burial and rest in his native soil.”

Tristram waved away the compliment.

“It was my duty, my lord, not just to my commander but to a man I deeply respected. Lord Pennel was a good and just man, my lord, the finest I’ve ever had the privilege of serving under.”

Lord Masterson didn’t answer immediately, instead looking down at his desk and flicking off an imaginary piece of dust from the polished surface while he gathered his thoughts. Finally, he raised his eyes back to the man before him.

“Thank you, Major, and you are right. He was good and just, perhaps too much so. In fact, I believe it was those very qualities that caused his death.”

“I’m sorry, my lord; I don’t follow you.”

Masterson fixed his brown eyes on Tristram’s blue ones.

“I have read your report, but I’d like to hear it from you personally; how did my brother die?”

The Major returned his gaze levelly, and the governor could find no hint of deception in his face as he gave the account.

“Bandits, my lord. Lord Pennel had taken Captain Squires and a squad of ten native cavalry along with the usual assorted staff, to make a short tour of the Northern sector of the district. I was left in command here. We expected him back in no more than a week.

“Five days after he left, a single native cavalryman – Singh, that was his name – returned on horseback, mortally wounded by a gunshot that had entered his back and exited through his lower stomach. Despite the ghastly wound, he had ridden for three days to bring word to us. Lord Pennel and his party had been ambushed by a large band of *Pindhari* bandits. As far as Singh knew, he was the only survivor. The poor man died less than five minutes after he arrived.

“It was late evening when Singh rode in, so I spent the night organizing the rescue party and seeing to the defenses here, and the next morning set out with twenty five cavalry and fifty infantry, along with an ambulance to bring back any wounded.

“The thing is, my lord, Singh died before giving us an exact location of where the battle took place, the result of which we searched for a more than a week before we found it, and by then, of course, it was far too late. We buried the natives in that spot, and brought the bodies of Lord Pennel and Captain Squires back with us in the ambulance.”

Lord Masterson nodded thoughtfully.

“What sort of wounds did my brother – Lord Pennel – exhibit?”

Major Tristram squirmed almost imperceptibly, clearly uncomfortable.

“I really couldn’t say, my lord.”

“I don’t understand.”

“My lord,” he sighed, “please allow me to apologize for what you force me to say. The *Pindharies* had stripped the bodies, and they lay exposed for nearly a fortnight before we found them. Between the heat and the animals, they were in such a state that the only way we recognized your brother and the captain from even the natives was by their lighter hair. There was no way to tell exactly how he was slain.” He added lamely, “I’ve very sorry, my lord.”

Masterson closed his eyes for a moment, clearly in pain, and Tristram cast his own eyes toward a painting on the wall he had seen a thousand times before in order to give his commander privacy in his grief. He drew deeply on his cigar as he studied the familiar image of the red-coated hunter on horseback leaping a fence in pursuit of an equally red-coated fox until the governor cleared his throat.

Unbeknownst to the Major, he had come to a decision.

“Thank you Major, for your honesty. It’s demonstrated to me that I can trust you with what I’m about to reveal.

“My brother was not killed by bandits.”

Tristram was clearly taken aback by the frank statement.

“My lord?”

“Lord Pennel was murdered, Major Tristram, because he had uncovered a vast conspiracy. He sent a letter and a package home before he left to make his fateful trip north, a letter that outlined exactly what it was he was looking for.”

Opening the drawer, he withdrew an object and laid it on the desk between them.

“Have you ever seen one of these, Major Tristram?”

The Major’s eyes widened momentarily as if Masterson had produced a cobra, then narrowed in thought at the non-descript piece of cotton cloth as long as his arm. It did vaguely resemble a snake, with a knot at one end and a second one in the middle. As far as the new governor was concerned, it resembled one in other aspects too.

Tristram finally looked up, clearly puzzled.

“I beg your pardon, my lord, but it’s a piece of cloth; it looks like a native’s handkerchief, perhaps, or possibly a sash.”

“More than that, sir, it’s a weapon.”

“A weapon?” The Major gingerly picked it up in his hands and examined it. The knotted end seemed to have a slight heft to it, as though it contained a coin or pebble. Holding it by the center knot, he struck it against the palm of his hand.

“It seems a bit light for a blackjack, my lord.”

Lord Masterson’s disappointment was plain in his tone. “How long have you been in India, Major Tristram?”

“Over twenty years, my lord.”

“Then I’m surprised you don’t recognize this. It is a *rhumal*, Major: a strangling scarf.”

Tristram sat silently for almost half a minute, a dawning look of horror on his face as he digested the information.

“Do you mean...*thuggee*?”

“I mean *thuggee*, Major Tristram; I mean precisely *thuggee*. *Thugs* – deceivers, followers of the black goddess Kali!”

The governor could see the officer was aghast, and with good reason; everyone knew of the cult of stranglers who had terrorized India for centuries, killing thousands, possibly even millions before being crushed by the British colonizers. Their deeds of murder in the name of their many-armed goddess of death were still told with shivers.

The Major finally recovered his voice.

“But my lord; Colonel Sleeman exterminated that scourge almost forty years ago.”

Masterson emphasized his next words by tapping his finger sharply on the desk.

“No sir! Major Sleeman *suppressed thuggee* a generation ago; he did not exterminate it. Besides, how you could exterminate even that great of an evil in this God-forsaken land is beyond me. Kali’s strangler cult survived, Major Tristram; what’s more, it has thrived in the shadows like a malignant fungus.”

“And Lord Pennel believed it to be here, in this district?” he asked incredulously, looking with a new horror at the *rhumal* in his hands.

“Not only did he believe it; he made me believe it too. Not only is it here, it has reached the very highest levels. I have good reason to believe that many of our own *sepoys* are secret *thugs*, and worse, that many of the civilian leaders are also deeply involved, either in accepting bribes for the concealment of thug murders or actively employed as thugs themselves.”

“Good Lord, sir!” Tristram fairly shouted, leaping to his feet in a fit of outrage. “Do you have the names of these scoundrels?”

Lord Masterson smiled in grim satisfaction at the reaction.

“Many of them; my brother sent a copy of the list to me before – before he was murdered. I have it right here: fifty-two names. That’s not all, but I have no doubt we can learn more from them once they are in custody.”

“I say, my lord! Excellent! When do we move?”

“There’s no time to waste; my coming might make some of them suspicious, particularly once it gets out that I am Lord Pennel’s brother. We must strike tonight, Major Tristram. I want to net them all in one fell swoop.”

The Major nodded, full of professionally suppressed excitement.

“I’ll get the men ready, my lord. If I may be so bold, I suggest we use only British troops, since some of the Indians may be compromised. We can trust our own, at least.”

Lord Masterson smiled, his former vague suspicions allayed. Tristram was certainly proving his worth.

“My own thoughts, sir, my very own thoughts!”

The governor stood, and as the two men shook hands again across the desk, the Major glanced at the window behind the governor, then

glanced a second time. He excused himself for a moment, stepped to the glass and looked out.

"I see I'm going to have to speak to Lieutenant Whitby," he muttered, obviously having observed some indiscretion on the part of his soldiers outside. He turned back to Masterson with a tight smile. "You have to keep after them, my lord; it's the country, you know. It's as if the heat here opens the pores of a man, allowing the spirit of the place to seep into his very soul. If he's here long enough, and fails to keep on his guard, he tends to become slovenly in both attitude and action, more like a native than a white man."

"That paints a terrible picture, Major. We can't have Englishmen being seen running about half-naked and bowing down to the heathen Hindu gods, can we?" he asked rhetorically, chuckling at the absurdity that image brought to mind.

"No my lord," Tristram concurred, still looking out the window, his smile broadening. "No we can't. That paints an absurd picture indeed!"

Returning to the former subject, he said, "My lord, might I see a copy of that list? I am particularly annoyed at the thought of thugs dishonoring my own *sepoys* by their presence. If I know who they are, I can see to it they're assigned a duty that will allow their quick and easy arrest when we move."

"Of course, Major. It's right here in my desk."

The governor turned to open a drawer, and Major Tristram continued conversationally, referring to something his new commander had mentioned earlier. "Yes, my lord, there are many heathen gods in this land: Shiva, Krisha...and *Kali*!"

The last word was a furious hiss that startled Lord Masterson. He had barely raised his head when the *rhumal* whipped around his throat.

INVADERS

I looked up at the far ridge, and saw the tree top moving. The hemlock sapling bent back and forth three times as the spotters over there pulled on the rope, then stopped. After a minute, it shook twice more, bending to the left and only being allowed to return as far as straight up this time between tugs. It told us what we needed to know.

The bugs were finally coming; two of them, and it was a damn good thing too, because we had been waiting in ambush for so long my belly felt like it was going to eat my backbone. It was time to get it done.

As I lowered my binoculars and made a series of signals with my hand, I saw the faint movements in the brush as the rest of the boys adjusted themselves for the last time. There wouldn't be any moving after this; them alien sons of bitches hear to good to risk it.

I reckon I ought to introduce myself; Lloyd Estep is my name, and I'm from what was Pocahontas County, West Virginia. If you're reading this, I don't need to tell you what happened the day the bugs came in their giant flying ships and cleared man from the Earth God gave him...or so they thought.

Nobody survived in the cities, the towns, even the villages. Anywhere there were more than a handful of houses clustered together is a slag plain now, blasted from orbit: a wasteland of melted soil and rock where nothing ever grows. The country boys and their families, living scattered and away from everybody else, were the only survivors, but then we always figured we would be if the hammer ever came down.

I reckon those missiles or death rays or whatever the hell it was they used on the towns were either too expensive or too scarce this far from whatever way-off shit-hole the bugs called home, otherwise they would have kept using them instead of raiding and killing on foot, house to house, to finish us off. That was when we finally saw what they were, and they finally got to see what we could do. It was then that they

began to understand the meaning of one of our expressions, 'paybacks are hell'. They must be, because we've sent enough of those monsters there.

I crouched down between a big moss-covered rock and the ashy-white bole of a hollow beech tree, the ghillie suit making me look like just another lump of brush. Of course, once you have to sit still, the urge to cough, to scratch, to pee, or to stand up and dance the Cotton-eye Joe becomes unbearable, but you bear it because you have to. I don't know if the bugs can smell at all, but they see well enough and you'd better believe they can hear a pin drop a mile away.

Farther up the holler, maybe a hundred yards away, I heard the faint sound of a stick breaking. Moving nothing but my eyes, I looked at each of the other men glaring out of their own camouflage suits; they all heard. Their eyes looked disembodied against their painted faces, some scared, some mad, some eager, but all ready.

More noise, closer now; I could hear them coming.

The biggest cities – or where the biggest cities had been – they turned into spaceports for re-supply. We soon came to realize that this was a colony, and the bugs were here to stay. At least that's what they thought; they didn't count on people like us, and couldn't see scattered handfuls of fugitive men as a real problem. They took us for granted, and I reckon they thought we were too reduced in numbers to be much of a threat.

That was a bad mistake on their part.

The first bug stepped out of the mountain woodbine and honeysuckle thicket, leaning forward and balanced by his short stiff tail, his big, strange-looking rifle at the ready. His upper body twisted this way and that as his faceted eyes took in the landscape. Satisfied, he waved a claw behind him and a second one appeared, a communications pack strapped to his back. *Hail, hail, the gang's all here!* I thought, fighting the fatal, death-wish urge to laugh out loud at my own joke.

They were some big ugly bastards, I'll give 'em that. I reckon the average bug would dress out about four or five hundred pounds, complete with a skin of leathery armor plates that looked like a spikey cross between a crawdad and a rhinoceros. They had a beak like a snapping turtle and big, poppy fly-eyes, all on a sloping, pointed head that sat square on the armored shoulders with no neck at all. Their heads didn't turn, but they didn't need to. They had ears that looked like oblong trumpet bells on short stalks, and they twitched, swiveling this way and that constantly. They made an old experienced buck deer look deaf as a post.

Like a deer, though, bugs seldom look up. If they had, they might have seen Frank Rawlins crouched on the high limb of a big black oak they were passing under. He carefully watched where they stepped along the path, and when of them was just setting a clawed foot over a log lying on the ground, Frank jerked the rope.

The other end was attached to a sturdy wooden trigger that supported about a ton of hard maple log we had cut and then hauled up earlier with a block and tackle. When he yanked the rope, the trigger let go and the bug with the rifle froze at the sound of it just long enough for a two thousand pound load to fall like a big wooden bomb and squash him like...well, like bug. That log hit him like a spear right between the shoulder blades – or where a man would have had shoulder blades – and drove him into the other log he was straddling, buckling his armor like a truck fender hitting a telephone pole. Blood squirted from the joints between the plates and he squeaked once as the weapon flew from his claws and clattered against a rock sticking up beside the path.

Then I fired. I didn't use a rifle because the sound carries for miles to their sensitive ears and would bring more of them running. Instead, I used a compound crossbow and sank a bolt right into the other one's communications module, making a shower of sparks and smoke from the frying circuits.

Instinctively the bug opened his beak to let out their strange, keening cry for help, but it was cut off into a grunt almost before it started when half-a-dozen thrown rocks bounced off his head at once from several directions, one of them splattering his compound right eye

across his ugly face. He stumbled and raised an arm in a vain attempt to protect himself as we broke cover and moved in on him with our spears and axes. Bugs might be strong, armored, and clawed, but they're not very fast. As long as you're careful, it's a simple matter for a good man, or especially a group of good men, to take one down and find the joints where the armor plates fitted together. It was over in seconds, at least the killing part.

The bugs were a disaster, but maybe they were a mixed blessing too. In one fell swoop they took those unable or unwilling to survive out of the gene pool, and left only the toughest behind. They put man back to his roots in no uncertain terms, and the only ones who lived were the ones who were best fit to live.

The bugs never leave their bases now. Lately no new ships have arrived but several have been leaving on a pretty regular basis. Unless I miss my guess, they'll all be gone within a year or two, leaving behind a planet too hostile even for all their might and technology.

As for us up here in the mountains, we'll be glad to be rid of 'em, you can bet on that, but in a funny way we'll miss 'em a little bit too. You see, when a man does something long enough and gets used to it, sometimes I reckon you could say he develops kind of a taste for it. Take the bugs for instance. They're a real bitch to shell out, but like I said before, they dress out at close to a quarter ton, and if you fry 'em up right, they taste just like chicken.

SNOW ANGELS

Pressing his face to the motel room window, Pete Carter stared out into the Midwestern blizzard. The snow fell in ripples and waves, going from half transparent to fully opaque, like someone shaking out the folds in a too-thin cotton sheet. In the gathering dusk, the storm of flakes was gray rather than white, and in their numbers they lost their individuality until they became a nebulous mass like swirling fog.

He knew he was lucky to have made it to the motel. His Peterbuilt eighteen-wheeler had passed half a dozen jack-knifed rigs, along with three times that many whose drivers had finally given up and simply pulled over to wait it out. Either way, they were all well on their way to being covered with snow and becoming one with the landscape.

Eyes locked intently at the road he could barely see and both hands white-knuckled on the wheel, Pete had determinedly kept pushing on, even though he knew it was crazy. To his way of thinking, being crazy right now was one hell of a lot better than the alternative.

He had once spent eight long hours alongside I-77 in another blizzard much like this one, and it was an experience he had no desire to repeat. Sitting there alone in the darkness listening to the moaning wind and unable to see past the front of his truck, his mind had begun to play tricks, to see things that shouldn't be there.

That *couldn't* be there.

Even though he knew they couldn't be real, he had seen people walking in the storm: not people either, but twisting columns of spinning, blowing snow that took their form. They wandered to and fro, and eventually drifted towards his rig. Like the nightmare shapes picked out by a frightened child in the crack of the plaster, the pattern of the wallpaper, or the fold of a curtain, they appeared and came and stared with eyes that were spots of dull, dark nothingness. Pressing their barely discernable features against the glass, they softly pawed at the barrier, reaching for him.

Almost as bad as their gray, ghostly faces were their voices as they opened the empty holes of their mouths and cried to him. In his

mind, the sound was a low, mournful, miserable moan that spoke of lost dreams, unfulfilled desires, and dripped with frozen tears. He tried to tell himself it was just the whistling wind, but he knew better. They had no substance of their own, no warmth, and they wanted his.

For the first time since he was a child, he had wet his pants as his bladder let go.

Terrified, soiled, and ashamed, he crawled into the sleeper and turned his back on the cab so he wouldn't have to look at them. Still he was unable to block their voices, or the soft sounds of their frozen, insubstantial hands endlessly brushing the metal and glass of his rig.

The storm seemed to go on forever.

That had been eight years ago, and he had never told anyone. If they had asked, he would have denied that any such thing could exist, just as he denied it to himself. Still, he never spent another night along the road in a blizzard. Come frozen hell or high water, Pete Carter would push on until he found a place to get out of the storm.

He had barely made this motel in Illinois. Watching the snow pile up outside, he knew, if he had been delayed just a few more minutes, he would be sleeping in his truck out there somewhere, alone in the cold dark.

He shivered so hard at the thought he had to grab the edge of the dresser for support.

Turning around, he crossed to the small coffeemaker that sat beside the bathroom sink. He pulled the pot out and poured a cup, despite the fact that it hadn't run all the way through yet, and the air filled with the sizzling and scorched smell as the liquid ran out onto the hot plate. Returning the pot, he ignored the cream and sugar, and took a sip from the foam cup. It was black and hot, everything the gray, cold evening was not. It felt good going down, but seemed to cool by the time it got to his stomach, and did nothing to warm him.

Despite his best efforts, his eyes were drawn back to the window again and again, like a tongue is drawn inexorably towards an aching tooth. Against his will, he stared across the room into the graying, snow-infested twilight beyond. The blizzard still showed no sign of stopping. Almost unconsciously and certainly unwillingly, his feet seemed to take on a life of their own and carried him to the glass.

He tried to ignore the snow, attempting instead to concentrate on the scenery, but there was little enough of it visible. Past the rapidly disappearing asphalt of the parking lot and its handful of snow-covered cars, there was a twenty-foot wide strip of winter-dormant grass, now invisible under its frozen blanket. After it was a woven wire fence, decorated with dry weeds and vines, and a few bare, skeletal trees, and beyond that a plowed field. Dimly, at its far edge, he could occasionally make out a big farmhouse in between flurries, but as far as he could tell from his vantage point, its windows were dark.

Pete idly wondered if anyone lived in it, and if so, why they were out in the storm. They must be out, because surely they would have a light on a night like tonight, no matter how frugal they might be. Idly, he wondered about what that family would be like. He grinned for a moment; if he had a telescope, he supposed he could be a peeping tom, that is, assuming there was anyone to see there.

With nothing else to do, he began to fantasize before he realized it. In a house that big, there would be a family: a real family, with a mother and father, and two – no, three children, two boys and a girl. They would be sitting at the supper table, still in their work clothes but with their hands freshly scrubbed and pressed together as the father said grace. The food would be plain but plentiful, a nice pork roast with potatoes and carrots maybe, a bowl of green beans, and a homemade apple pie for dessert. The pie would still be hot as the mother set it on the table.

His mouth watered, and he pictured himself walking across the field and knocking on the door, being invited in and the smiling woman setting an extra place just for him.

He was still staring, letting his mind wander, when something caught his attention and made him gasp. Just for a moment, a fleeting instant, he thought he saw a swirl of snow in the field beginning to take on the shape of a human figure. He blinked once, and it was gone.

He turned his gaze back to the house with relief, but it was short lived. The fantasy abruptly changed through no will of his own. There would be no family in a dark house. Instead, half its windows would be broken, clapboards would be falling off here and there, and the kitchen would hold only rotting cabinets with spider webs connecting the

shelves and birds' nests on top. The fireplace would be long dead and cold, the only sounds would be the mice rummaging through the skeleton of a dead home. And in the bedrooms, there would be blood spatters dried and crusted on the moldering wallpaper, and deep down beneath the reflecting sky eye of the old well, and under the dirt floor of the root cellar...

Jerking his mind away, Pete recoiled with horror, not at what he had pictured in his mind's eye, but at why he had pictured it.

What the hell's wrong with me to think something like that? What am I becoming?

The worst part of it was he couldn't shake the feeling that what he saw inside his head was not a fantasy at all, but a grim, unspeakable reality that had manifested itself in all its black and scarlet glory on some frustrating, freezing winter's night just like this one.

Still gazing at the structure, he saw the rate of snowfall had increased and reduced it to a menacing silhouette, barely visible, and then he saw more.

Even at that distance, he could make out the dim figures beginning to form around it. There were five of them at first, swirling forlorn and insubstantial in the cold wind. He could only stare as they began moving, drifting across the field towards the motel, towards him. Others rose here and there from the fields or from the storm and joined the rest, and he could feel the touch of their empty eyes. Even at the distance, he could sometimes make out the holes of their mouths as they called silently to him.

No! Not again!

Jerking the white nylon cords, he quickly drew the drapes together and backed away slowly until his hip hit the TV set, nearly knocking it off the dresser. Instinctively trying to catch it, he felt a faint hope that if he could distract himself, they wouldn't bother him. Reaching for the power button with the intention of turning on CNN or some music channel and cranking up the volume, he froze. There was a sound at the window, a soft brushing against the glass. The curtain moved slightly, as if there were a draft, and Pete watched it like it was a snake. He heard the faint hiss of the wind then, through the crack of a rotted, ill-fitting window gasket, and the first trickle of snow forced its

way past. More followed, and the wind along with it, like cold, dark water wearing its way through a tiny break in a dam. The powder began to pile up on the sill and the floor, and the cold breath of the wind began to stir and lift it.

Slowly he rose to his feet, backing away until he touched the wall. Instinctively he pressed his back against it, paralyzed with terror.

Two miles down the road, the weight of the snow finally proved too much, and a power line parted with the brief flash of an electrical arc.

The entire area, along with the Restful Sleep Motel and Room Number 4, plunged abruptly into darkness.

Authorities fear a missing truck driver may be dead after becoming lost in last night's blizzard. According to Illinois State Police spokesman Officer Ron Ferguson, independent trucker Peter Carter of Lexington, Kentucky was reported missing from his room at the Restful Sleep Motel where he had checked in last night.

Early this morning, following last night's blizzard and the resulting power outage that covered the area, Otis Ray, the owner of the motel, reported he had noticed the door to Mr. Carter's room standing open. No one was in the room, but it had apparently been open to the weather since sometime last night, because a large amount of snow had blown inside.

Officer Ferguson said, although the case is still under investigation, foul play is not suspected. Robbery certainly doesn't appear to have been a motive, as Mr. Carter's truck was still in the parking lot, and his wallet and keys were still in the room. Officials theorize that, for some reason, he left the motel on foot at the height of the blizzard. Tracking dogs are being brought in, but the police privately say they're not holding out much hope of finding him alive.

Author's note: *POTTER'S FIELD* is a tribute to the Cthulu Mythos of the late, great H.P. Lovecraft (If you haven't read his works you should; not only will you expand your imagination more than you ever dreamed, but you'll certainly understand this story a little better.), who, along with his friend and contemporary, Robert E. Howard, has provided me with some of my greatest influence. The actual inspiration for the story, however, came directly from personal experience. I worked for a while digging graves in an asylum cemetery that served as a model for the one in the story. The story is, of course, fiction, but the mood of such places, especially in the fall of the year, is very, very real.

POTTER'S FIELD

**Massachusetts
October 1929**

Over the rasping of her breath, she could hear the hoarse, croaking calls echoing from the direction she had come. Even though logic told her they were still far behind, she cast an involuntary glance backward. She could see the tracks of the abandoned railroad in the pale light of the curved gibbous moon and the vast flatness of the whispering grass sea of the salt marsh it cut through. She paid for the look back with the third fall of the night as her toe caught in a rotted wooden tie and sent her sprawling, eliciting a gasp of pain as the gravel gouged another chunk out of her already bleeding knees and splinters filled her hands. Immediately she staggered to her feet and hurried on, only faintly aware of the burrs and briars reclaiming the disused line as they clawed the blood from her shins.

She had been moving as fast as her quivering legs could carry her for over two hours, and now not even the faint glow of the decaying town behind her was visible. Dimly, she was aware that she couldn't continue her pace much longer, but she had no choice; to let them catch her was too horrible to contemplate.

Then they were there.

They didn't come from behind, but from in front. Two of them climbed like trolls, naked and dripping from under the half-collapsed trestle that crossed a nameless tidal creek, and in her exhaustion, she nearly ran into them. They had come through the hidden waterways of the salt marsh faster than she could run. An utter impossibility, but they were there and reaching for her. Dodging their grasping, short-fingered hands, she flung herself to one side and leapt down the embankment into the grass.

Instantly she sank down into the stinking sulfurous mud past her knees. She jerked and plunged frantically like a trapped animal, first one way and then another, as she vainly attempted to free herself. Then their hands were on her arms, and they dragged her out with a loud, sucking sound as the hungry mud flowed back into place. Struggling, she tried to fight back, but their fishermen's muscles, developed from years of pulling oars and nets, handled her as if she were a child. She managed to land a kick on one's shin, bringing first a startled yelp, and then a fist to her jaw that left her in a state of semi-consciousness.

Vaguely, she was aware that they were laying her on her back in the center of the track. One of them unwrapped a coil of stout cod line from around his bare waist, and they quickly bound her wrists and ankles to the rusty rails, securing the knots and stretching her spread-eagled so tightly she felt as if she were on a rack. Once she was secure, the one who had brought the bindings stood, turned in the direction she had come, and uttered a strange keening cry: a cry that was faintly answered by excited voices from far away. While his companion was announcing their catch, her other captor produced a long, slender filleting knife from a beaded sheath that hung about his neck on an elaborate and curiously knotted cord, and began slicing her clothes off until they were piled up around her and she was entirely naked. Her nipples hardened into tight brown knobs as the chill bumps raised all over her body, and steam rose from her sweating flesh in the cool of the autumn night.

Within minutes, she could not only hear the rising volume of her pursuers' voices but also feel the vibrations of their slapping footsteps through the rails. I will not scream, she promised herself. No matter what happens, I will not give them the satisfaction.

Soon, the panting crowd surrounded her, lust and anticipation evident in their large bulging eyes and the sneers of their wide, pendulous lips. Only one approached her, however: one of their women. Casting aside her strange, embroidered robe, she stepped forward as naked as the captive, her lack of clothing emphasizing her faintly repulsive physique that was typical of the townspeople. Reaching between her breasts, she lifted the primitive knife she wore as a pendant, its blade a single huge tooth from one of the great white sharks of the ocean depths, held in the tentacled embrace of a golden figure that resembled both squid and man, and at the same time looked like neither. Taking the thin gold chain that bore it from her neck, she wrapped the fine links around her fist and turned to face the direction of the sea, before raising the object aloft. She held that position for several minutes, chanting incomprehensible, impossibly ancient words never intended for human speech. Then she then knelt beside her victim, and the pain began.

With the serrated razor-edge of the tooth, she began cutting esoteric symbols and designs, using the bound woman's naked flesh as the canvas of her ghastly work, muttering the chant all the while. Each cut barely split the skin, but they were many, and the captive's body was soon slick with blood. Not a little of it came from her nails digging into her own palms and her teeth into her lips as she chewed them in agony. Still, they got no more than an occasional grunt or moan from her as she fought back the pain that threatened to break from her throat in a cacophonic frenzy of cries.

After an eternity, the marking ceased, and her tormentor arose and stepped aside. The whole band formed themselves into a pair of lines along the outsides of the rails and stood in expectant silence. Soon another pair of fishermen arrived, moving as slowly as the figure limping up the center of the track between them with the aid of the two canes he leaned heavily upon. Nothing could be seen of his features, for he wore a tent-like embroidered robe not unlike that of the priestess with the toothed pendent: a garment that concealed his form, while its hood and drooping veil likewise hid his features. Stopping between the woman's spread legs, he opened his arms in a ghastly parody of

crucifixion, and his attendants stepped forward from either side to remove first his canes, and then his robe.

Seeing what awaited her, the woman finally broke her promise. Her screams echoed across the vastness of the marshes, even over the croaking triumphant chants that broke forth from the crowd.

West Virginia November 1982

“Autumn is a time of dying. Hell, even the trees know it!”

The old man waved a hand at the gigantic maples surrounding the graveyard where they toiled in the earth. If the trees weren’t exactly dying, the leaves certainly were. As the west wind blew through the branches they came off in flocks, swirling on the air currents in a colorful blizzard, whipping around the two laborers and the tufts of dead, nearly white grass that waved from the indifferently kept cemetery. Though the leaves were dead, they were not quiet; they rustled and whispered to each other as they sifted through the twigs, and crawled across the ground until they caught on the grass or piled up against the rusty woven wire fence stapled to the shedding trees.

“You’re kind of morbid today, ain’t you?”

The old man looked at the younger one shoveling beside him in the waist-deep hole, and straightened himself up to his full height of five-foot six: considerably smaller than his companion.

The two were a study in contrasts; one was way on the wrong side of sixty, lean as a rawhide bootlace, with what little hair he had more white than gray and cut close to his head beneath his battered cap, while the other was on the right side of thirty, burly and unshaven, with dark locks that hadn’t seen the scissors for a good six months.

“Man’s got a right to be morbid when he gets my age.” He shrugged his bony shoulders a couple of times, loosening the muscles. “The Bible says we’re allotted three score and ten, and I’m getting too close for comfort. Won’t be too long till I’ll be living on borrowed time.”

The other grunted as he drove his shovel into a particularly hard patch of red clay.

“Shoot, you’re too ornery to die. You’ll probably out-live me.”

“Probably will, the way you carouse and carry on.”

Actually, it was just banter and they both knew it. The men, employed by a local funeral home that had the contract for the state funerals in the area, worked together often and enjoyed each other’s company. The pay wasn’t much, just a “hunnert a hole” split between them, but to an old man on a Social Security pittance like Jake Bennett or an out-of-regular-work young one who had just lost everything in a divorce like Rick Grimes, the tax-free cash under the table from the mortician came in handy.

They worked on in silence for a bit until the Rick straightened up and looked at his partner.

“Jake, we’re deep enough that we’re getting in each other’s way. Why don’t you go ahead and climb out for a while, and I’ll finish her up.”

The old man realized Rick had probably heard his labored breathing and wanted him to quit before he had a heart attack. *Smart-assed punk!*

Still, he was grateful for the break; truth be told, he wasn’t sure his companion might not be right. Leaning his shovel handle against the vertical wall of the grave with the point in the dirt, he put his foot on top of the blade to give him a boost and used both arms to heave himself out. Joints creaking, he got to his feet, cursing his infirmities under his breath while Rick deliberately looked the other way and carefully showed no sign he was aware of the old man having any trouble at all.

Jake knew that he was trying to leave him some pride, and he was both grateful and irritated at the thought. Fishing in his pocket, he drew out a battered old pipe, carefully packed it, and turned his back to the wind, hunching over and using his body as shield to get it lit. The wind snatched the smoke away like it had never been.

Rick’s voice came from the ground.

“No Camels today?”

“I’m trying to cut back; they’re taking my wind. Besides, a pipe gives a wise man time to think.”

Or a fool something to stick in his mouth, he mentally completed the old homespun proverb. Shivering against the bite of the coming winter on the wind, he wrapped his hands around the old briar bowl, feeling the warmth seep into his gnarled fingers, and added a new part:

Or something to warm an old man's hands.

As much as he hated to admit it, Rick was right; he was morbid. Of course, looking down at the dead grass half-hiding the cheap, rusty plaques that marked the graves, up at the rapidly baring branches filtering the featureless gray sky, or across the broad river valley at more of the same, he reckoned it was a pretty good day for it. For the icing on the whole depressing cake, he could see the grim old asylum just down the hill.

With its aging population of long-time inmates, the stark brick building was where they got most of their burying business these days; in fact, it was Burke Asylum's private graveyard they were digging in right now.

"You've done this for a long time, Jake. How many people you reckon are buried here?"

Shaken out of his reverie, the old man looked down into the hole at his questioner.

"Ain't nobody knows. The nut-house has been here since right after the War Between the States, and they used to just put up wooden crosses for markers – they'd be gone in three or four years."

"Didn't they ever replace them?"

"What for? If anybody ever gave a damn about them when they were alive, they wouldn't be buried up here, I don't reckon. Sure as hell nobody's gonna care when they're dead.

"Besides, the whole place got fouled up about ten years ago. We had a week of hard rain and a big section of the hillside slipped. About thirty coffins ended up down in the holler. The asylum people put on a little show, but there really wasn't no sorting them out; we just reburied them and stuck up what plaques we could find for show."

Rick threw a final spade full of dirt out of the hole and called for a flat-pointed shovel to smooth the bottom and sides.

"How do you keep track? Ain't you afraid of digging down into a full one?"

“Done it once; not here though. It was in a little church cemetery down in the river bottoms near Letart. I had the hole down about four feet and found an old coffin sticking a foot out the side into the hole. Whoever dug that one was a lazy son of a bitch, I reckon, and didn’t put it deep enough.

“Well sir, I widened the hole the other way and I was just about done when I went to fling out a shovel full and the blade hit that old rotten coffin and busted a big hole in it. Over the years that pine box had filled up with the water that had seeped into it, and it all came gushing out like somebody pouring piss out of a boot. It was black and stunk, my *God!*”

Rick wrinkled his nose at the thought.

“How’d you ever get rid of the smell?”

“We had to lime the hole, and it still stunk like hell the next day during the funeral. We felt bad about it, but there wasn’t nothing we could do.”

“Man! I hope I never get into that kind of a deal!” Finished, Rick sat his own shovel up and used it to climb out. “I’m too weak-stomached for something like that.”

“Not likely now, unless somebody gets lazy like in that case; the State changed the regulations. You know how they used to say six feet under? Well I figure that’s why we only have to make the hole four and a half feet deep now; that way the funeral directors can stack ‘em up right on top of each other in these old cemeteries without making a mess like that, and with nobody being the wiser. Hell, we could be digging right overtop of one right now and you’d never know it.”

“You know, you’re a regular bundle of joy,” the young man remarked sarcastically before changing the subject. “You want to check her out, see if it suits you?”

Jake, pipe still in his mouth, leaned over and looked at the fresh grave with a critical eye and the tobacco pouch he hadn’t gotten quite all the way down in the pocket of his overalls picked that time to fall out.

Looking at the bag lying of the bottom of the hole, the old man muttered a single word with great feeling.

“Shit!”

“Don’t worry about it, Jake; I’ll get it for you.” With that, Rick squatted down, braced his hands on the lip of the hole, and dropped inside. His feet hit the bottom and kept going another foot and a half, right into the forgotten casket that was hidden just below the surface.

The splintering of rotten wood and the splash as his boots disappeared to their tops were enough to tell the story, even without the sickening stench that roiled up.

“Oh God!” Rick cried out, near to panic at what he was standing in. Wrenching to free his feet, his fear and disgust turned into a yelp of pain as the wood splinters dug into his legs.

“Hold still!” the old man ordered harshly as he saw what was happening. “Don’t cut your legs up and get that stuff in ‘em – you’ll get gangrene sure as shit!”

“I’ll get down there real easy-like and work your legs out.” He extended a shovel. “Take this and lay it along side you. I can stand on it and spread my weight out so I don’t go into that mess too.”

Pale and gagging, Rick’s hand had almost closed on the white oak handle when there came another crack, duller yet louder than the splintering wood had been. A scream tore from his throat and Rick’s right leg abruptly folded about three inches below where it was supposed to and dropped him suddenly, and his left leg slid up into the coffin as he fell. He fell forward and caught himself on his hands before his face hit the ground.

“It’s got me! *Jake, it’s got me!*”

Unsure exactly what had happened, Jake snapped at him.

“Damn it, don’t panic! Just hold still and I’ll...”

His sentence was never completed. Instead, he watched in horror as a long-clawed, webbed hand on the end of a leprous white arm pushed its way through the broken wood and earth, and then pushed its way into Rick’s stomach just above his big brass belt buckle. A second one joined it, hooked its talons into the younger man’s left thigh – and ripped the muscle away as it peeled it down, leaving the gleaming bone exposed.

Jake didn’t know exactly what he was seeing, but he came from the hard, old school. Without hesitation, he drove the shovel’s point like a bayonet against one of the limbs, slashing it to the bone just above the

elbow. The black ichor that gushed out bore less resemblance to blood than to the stagnant water in the coffin. Faster than he would have believed, the hand turned like a striking snake and closed on the shovel handle, ripping it from his grasp before he could withdraw it for a second strike. The tool flailed for an instant before the length of hardwood was slammed back against the old man's upper chest.

The sound of his collarbone snapping was much louder in his ears than Rick's breaking leg had been.

Jake was knocked to the ground and rolled once before staggering to his feet, his left arm dangling loosely and sending a shaft of red-hot agony through him as it swung helplessly. Gazing back into the grave through the fog of pain, he saw that Rick had been pulled into the coffin up to his waist, and both the clawed hands were buried in his body cavity, churning ferociously and ripping out handfuls of gut before pulling them down into the ground.

Rick was no longer struggling or screaming; instead, he looked up at Jake through his fading consciousness and mouthed two words:

Help me!

Jake helped him the only way he could. Picking up the mattock they had used to break the ground in the first place, Jake set his jaw and swung the heavy tool one-handed with all the strength he could muster and buried the short, axe-like blade in Rick's skull.

The bottom of the grave caved in still farther, and he caught a glimpse of what was below.

It had been a lot of years since Jake Bennett had run, but he ran now. Not towards the truck, for the keys were in Rick's pocket, and not even in the direction of the gate, which would have forced him to go away from the grave and then back past it along the outside of the fence. Instead he instinctively took at most direct line he could manage towards help.

No one, least of all Jake, would have thought him capable of vaulting the wire fence, but he did. Hitting it at a dead run with his overall legs flapping around his spindly shanks, he grabbed the single top strand of barbed wire with his right hand, never noticing the steel point that tore a chunk of flesh from his palm, and flung himself over, slamming down hard on the ground on the other side.

He nearly blacked out from the pain as his collarbone fracture compounded, the jagged bone end tearing its way out through his flesh and shirt, where it bulged his overall strap. He fought off the waves of blackness as he scrambled clumsily to his feet, clutching his dangling arm and cradling it to him. He wasn't about to stay here; behind him he could hear the sounds from the grave increasing. He broke into a shambling stagger down the hill.

Ignoring the weeds and briars that ripped at him, he finally made it to the road they had come up – just two weedy tracks through the pasture, suitable only for a tractor or a four wheel drive. It was a hundred yards to the gate.

When he reached the bars of galvanized sheet metal, he let go of his arm and almost collapsed from pain and shock, and from the fatigue of his unexpected exertion. Reaching out with his good hand, he managed to knock off the open padlock hooked through the ends of the short piece of chain that acted as a latch, sending it splattering into the deep mud. Shoving the barrier aside he staggered through and made it a few yards beyond before he heard the cry behind him.

Twisting his head, he could see the cemetery at the top of the hill, and the pale, fish-white figure that stood there, arms akimbo, roaring its anger at him. It was too far away to make out many details, but he could make out enough.

Jake gasped and forgot the pain of his shattered collarbone as a giant fist clutched at his heart and squeezed. His false teeth grinding together hard enough to snap the upper plate, he collapsed.

“So, you going to ask her out?”

The young man's voice was intentionally loud in order to be heard over the roar of the tractor. He was perched precariously on the fender, with one hand braced against the back of the seat where his twin brother sat, driving the old red machine as it rumbled along the muddy track toward the barn.

“I don't know...”

“Chicken shit!”

“I ain't chicken shit! I just... I don't know.”

“I know – you're chicken shit!”

“I am not! You’re –“

The driver’s protest turned into a cry of surprise as his passenger lunged forward without warning and grabbed the wheel, cranking it hard to the right. The sudden change of direction nearly turned the machine over.

“Damn you!” the driver shouted, shaking at the near miss as he jammed on the brake. “What the hell’s the matter with you?”

His brother never heard him. He was already off the tractor and kneeling in the track, pulling at an object that looked like a mud covered log they had nearly ran over. As he rolled it, the driver whitened as he saw a human figure, brown with the dripping mire.

Sheriff Tom Boggess, State Trooper Randal Smith, and a young ashen-faced deputy peered down at the white-coated doctor. Ben Taylor was crouched down, working in the open grave.

“What happened here, Doc?”

The balding, bespectacled medical examiner picked up another bloody fragment of skull.

“It beats the hell out of me.”

“Look,” the sheriff pressed him, a little annoyed at his distinctly unhelpful answer. “Can you at least tell me something?”

“I can tell you something, but it won’t make any damn sense. Here’s what we’ve got.

“We know Rick Grimes was supposed to be working with Jake today, and these bits of clothes and this wallet seem to indicate that the deceased is probably him.” He gestured at a plastic evidence bag that held half a lower jaw and several loose teeth. “I’ll know for sure when I get his dental records.”

He gestured at the lawmen with broken piece of skull he held in his gloved hand.

“We won’t know until we get this stuff to the lab in Charleston, but I’ll bet you five dollars that this cut right here,” he pointed first at the bone, then at the bloody tool lying in the corner of the hole, “was made by that mattock right there. That’s the same kind of mark as when that hopped-up Frye boy killed Mary Jackson about six years ago. From the

amount of blood soaked into this ground, I'd say Grimes, if that's who this is, was killed right here in this grave."

Trooper Smith blew out his breath.

"Looks like it's open and shut then. Grimes and old man Bennett got into a fight, and Grimes broke the old fart's collarbone before Jake buried the mattock in his head. Considering the age and size difference, nobody's going to call it anything but self defense."

"Smitty, I don't know if Jake knocked him in the head or not, but he damned sure didn't eat him! Look at this shit – there's not enough meat left on these bones to make soup with!"

At that, the deputy promptly turned and managed to stumble exactly three and a half steps before throwing up. The others ignored him.

"Dogs, maybe?" Smith asked. "The game warden ran into a pack of wild ones about a mile from here a couple of months ago, and had to shoot two of them to get away."

"Maybe a bear?" the sheriff suggested. "They're starting to spread over this way from what I hear."

The medical examiner shook his head.

"I've seen people killed by dogs, and it doesn't look anything like this. I don't think it's a bear either; there isn't any bear that could eat that much at one sitting. Besides, look at the bones. They're nearly cleaned of flesh, and all the long bones have been split; most of the marrow's gone. That gash in his head might have been made by a mattock, but it looks to me like something or somebody stuck the claws or fingers or whatever of both hands into it the hole and ripped that skull apart, and then removed the brain. There's not trace of it or of any other organ here; whoever or whatever did this either carried them off or ate them on site; at any rate, they're not here."

"Some thing or somebody?" Boggess asked him. "Surely you don't think it was a person that did this?"

"I don't know what to think; I only know that nothing fits."

"Can I help?"

The police officers turned and Taylor straightened to peer out over the edge of the hole at an elderly man who approached them. Despite almost ninety years of age and a brass-topped cane, he walked with a straight, dignified gait, and wore his obviously expensive if out of style

suit and long coat like a movie star. An imported tweed cap defied the wind and clung precariously on his thinning, snow-white hair, and an equally pale military moustache graced his upper lip. The men recognized him immediately as the retired head of the asylum.

“Dr. Whitmore – what brings you up here?”

“Good afternoon, Sheriff. I was attending an awards ceremony for some members of the staff when I heard what happened.” He looked into the grave and paled slightly. “A terrible thing.”

“I reckon so. You don’t have any ideas do you, Doctor?”

“No, but I do have a question; where’s the other body?”

The men looked startled.

“What other body?”

“The one that was in that coffin,” he said, pointing at the broken wood and the muddy pit in the bottom of the hole. “They evidently dug down into an unmarked grave and broke it open. Have you found any bones that are not so...fresh?”

“No, but then there’s no telling how old this grave is. I’ve seen bodies dissolve away to practically nothing in certain soils before; all you find is black dirt and coffin fittings. Maybe that’s what happened here,” the medical examiner offered, but the older doctor shook his head.

“In certain soils, perhaps, but not in this soil. I was here when the hill slipped several years ago, disgorging the contents of some of the oldest graves. A few of the coffins were broken in the slide, but most of them, along with their occupants, remained more or less intact – often fairly well preserved, in fact. So I would hypothesize that if the remains from this burial are not present, it can only be because someone removed them.”

Boggess surreptitiously glanced at him, alerted to something not quite right by the tremor in his voice.

The trooper swore violently at the thought of yet another complication, but the Whitmore ignored him.

“Some of this damage was done with teeth.” It wasn’t a question, and from the gnawed condition of the bones readily visible even from a distance, it didn’t need to be. “Do you have a preliminary bite radius yet, Doctor?”

Taylor shook his head.

“I though I did, but I was mistaken.”

“Why?”

“Because it was too big – it measured nearly ten inches across.”

“Good Lord!” The doctor’s voice was barely a whisper, and sweat beaded on his brow despite the chill.

“Here,” he continued, offering a broken, split section of femur for examination, along with a magnifying glass. “You can see what I mean. I don’t know of any animal around here, or human either, that has a mouth that wide. And look at the scratches left by the teeth, or whatever it was that tore the flesh off. I looked at them with the magnifying glass, and the marks appear to be made by pointed objects; they cut little V-shaped grooves in the bone, rather than flat scrapes like human incisors would. It looks like a mouthful of knives.” He was silent for a moment, and then continued.

“I know this sounds stupid, but I swear that the only thing I’ve seen anything at all like this was at that seminar last year down in Hilton Head, when they let us examine the damaged tibia of a shark attack victim.”

Whitmore’s knees buckled, and if Boggess hadn’t grabbed him, he would have pitched headlong into the grave.

“You alright, Doctor?”

Trembling visibly, Whitmore extricated himself from the lawman’s grip.

“I – I’m fine. I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

He turned and hurried away from the stunned officers at the fastest walk he could manage without breaking into an outright run.

The trooper’s suspicious eyes narrowed.

“I’d have to say that old man knows something.”

Sheriff Boggess silently agreed, and he intended to find out what.

The hospital was cold, white, and stank of antiseptic, just like the old man on the bed, shivering under the thin blanket as he spoke. Boggess and Smith stared intently at Jake Bennett as he finished his tale.

Trooper Smith slid his hand up his forehead, scooting his campaign hat back with an audible rasping noise as the felt slid over the bristles of his burr haircut.

“That’s got to be the damndest thing I ever heard.”

“Look, Jake,” the sheriff said. “Are you sure that this is the story you want to go with? I mean, men fight and sometimes it gets out of hand. Considering you’re damn near fifty years older than Rick and a hundred pounds lighter, no jury in the world...”

“No!” The old man slammed his gnarled fist down on the mattress. “We didn’t fight – I liked that boy! That damned thing tore his guts out and was eating him while he was still alive; when I killed him, it was mercy!”

Smith blew out his breath in exasperation.

“Do you really expect anyone to believe that some kind of monster popped up out of a coffin six feet under the ground and ate your buddy? What were you two drinking up there?”

“I don’t give a damn what you believe, you smart-assed son of a bitch; I was there and saw what happened! You didn’t! Where the hell were you, handing out parking tickets?”

“Now Jake,” Tom said, motioning with his palms for calm and casting a worried glance at the heart monitor the old man was hooked up to. “Are you sure it wasn’t a bear? Maybe Rick broke through into its den or something, I don’t know. Think real hard now; could that be it?”

“Sheriff, unless it was a hairless white bear with webbed hands and a face that looked like something out of a horror movie, living in a coffin full of water, then no; it wasn’t a bear.”

Still hopeful for some explanation that made sense, Bogges pressed him gently.

“Do you have any idea what it could be then?”

“Yeah, I know exactly what it was; it was one of them damned deformed lunatics that asylum buried alive God knows how many years ago!”

“Jake, just think about it for a minute; do you know how crazy that sounds?”

The old man fixed him with a hard glare.

“Yeah, I know just how crazy that sounds, but that’s what happened.”

Out in the hall, Boggess spoke quietly to Smith.

“Have you got any ideas?”

The trooper sighed and shook his head.

“Not a one. I know Jake saw something; hell, I think he believes he’s telling us the truth, but I’m not about to file a report about a man eaten by a zombie out of *‘Night of the Living Dead’*.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Look, we’re going to have make a statement soon, something official. What are we going to say?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re a big help. I think that we can stall them if we say we have a possible homicide, but we’re withholding the details until we get the full report from the coroner. That’ll give us some time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time to go have a little talk with Doctor Whitmore.”

Whitmore didn’t look surprised when he answered the door.

“Sheriff Boggess, Officer Smith; what can I do for you?”

“We’d like to discuss the events at the cemetery and see if you can add any information. May we come in?”

“Of course,” he said, stepping back from the door and gesturing gracefully with a manicured hand for them to enter.

He led them down the mahogany paneled walls to his study, and both lawmen gazed at the book-lined shelves covering the room’s walls. Hundreds, maybe thousands of volumes were there; most of them antique. The place actually smelled of them, the old leather and dry paper overpowering the hint of good tobacco and better Scotch. Whitmore gestured toward a vintage but immaculate leather upholstered sofa.

“Have a seat, gentlemen. I’d offer you a drink, but I see you’re in uniform. Coffee perhaps?”

They both nodded affirmatively, and in moments were nervously holding obviously expensive china cups and saucers. Gingerly, they sipped the brew, not surprised that it was of the same high quality that everything else in the house – really more of a mansion - seemed to be.

Pouring a cup for himself and replacing the pot on a tiny antique warming stove, the doctor settled himself in a wingback chair and crossed his long legs.

“What was it you wished to ask me about?”

The two cops looked at each other, and it was the sheriff who spoke.

“Doctor Whitmore, do you know of anything unusual about the Burke cemetery?”

“Unusual in what way?”

Boggess puffed his cheeks. Whitmore obviously wasn’t going to give up more than he had to, so he guessed the best way would be to just lay the cards on the table.

“Doctor, this sounds crazy, but Jake Bennett claims a monster came up out of an abandoned grave that he and the victim accidentally dug into and tore Grimes apart.”

Instead of the scoffing incredulity he expected, Whitmore fixed him with a thoughtful stare.

“Did he tell you what this ‘monster’ looked like?”

“A lot like a man,” Smith broke in. “At least in some ways. The witness described him as slender, pale to the point of white, with hands and feet that were webbed and clawed. He claimed the head was unnaturally broad, almost frog-like, with popping eyes and a huge mouth full of teeth.”

The sheriff took up the conversation again.

“Mr. Bennett believes that the man, or creature, or whatever it was to be somehow connected with the asylum; someone buried alive and somehow surviving for decades underground. It’s crazy I know but...”

His voice trailed off. Whitmore sat silently, lost in thought. Reaching into a small humidor on the table beside him, opened it, and offered a cigar to his guests, who declined. He pulled out one for himself, and unhurriedly prepared and lit it, obviously savoring the flavor as he came to a decision. Finally, he spoke.

“Jake Bennett was right.”

“What?” The trooper was almost shouting. “That’s impossible!”

“I think you’ll find, Officer Smith, that the line between possible and impossible is sometimes more blurred than you might think.

“Hear me out, gentlemen. I’m about to confess to a crime committed nearly sixty years ago. The statute of limitations has long since run out, but not the consequences of my actions it seems.

“Following World War I, I returned from France and took a position as chief surgeon at Burke Asylum. It seems that my experience with the madness of war qualified me to deal with the madness there.

“You need to understand, at that time, conditions in places like this were brutal beyond what you can even imagine today. A patient’s condition was more likely to be ‘treated,’ if you can call it that, by beatings, restraints, and isolation than by anything resembling or even pretending to be therapy. Many of the doctors saw Burke’s inmates as human guinea pigs for testing their own theories, and many of the attendants were sadists and rapists, and used their positions as an outlet for their urges. Patients were frequently injured in the process, and not a few died from the abuse. Some of those ‘forgotten’ graves up there were forgotten for a reason. They were the preferred method of disposal for the results of embarrassing ‘incidents’ at Burke.”

“Good Lord!” Boggess exclaimed. “Why didn’t somebody say anything?”

“Who would say it? Our doctors were the ones who did the autopsies and signed the death certificates. The asylum operated under a sort of ‘code of silence’ concerning mistakes and excesses committed by its employees – something I’m told police officers such as yourselves are familiar with.” The pair squirmed uncomfortably. “Mr. Burke, the asylum’s director, made it clear from the beginning that what happened there stayed there, and it was worth anyone’s job to rock the boat. The families didn’t inquire – most seemed secretly relieved at the news of their relative’s death; after all, they’d already buried them and all the surrounding embarrassment of their conditions in the tomb called Burke Asylum.

“I despised that system, gentlemen; I want you to know that. I couldn’t change it though, so I did what I could for the patients in my capacity, to ease their lot.

“In 1930 I was appointed director following Mr. Burke’s death. That very same year, they brought the woman in.

“Her name was Sylvia Whately, from Massachusetts – from a well-known and respected Boston family, I understand. She was twenty-one years old: a college student at Miskatonic University. While on holiday, somewhere near the town of Innsmouth – an infamous place, by all accounts – she suffered an incredibly savage rape. Not only was she brutally sexually assaulted, but her face and the entire front surfaces of her body and limbs were covered with occultic symbols cut into her flesh. She was found by hunters along the banks of the Miskatonic River, wandering naked and raving. Her mind had completely snapped from the trauma she experienced, and she never was never again lucid enough to speak a word. The family had no choice but to put her away.”

“Massachusetts is a long way from West Virginia,” the trooper interrupted him. “How did she end up all the way down here?”

The doctor grimaced with obvious distaste.

“At that time, mental illness was considered a shameful thing. As it was believed to run in families, it tended to bring the entire bloodline into disrepute, and could virtually destroy them socially. Even worse, once it was discovered that Sylvia had been impregnated by her rapist, her parents determined to have her moved as far away as possible; two scandals were more than they were prepared to deal with. They quietly transferred her here.

“Sylvia was never a problem as such, but she was a curiosity. She was a handsome young woman, in spite of being covered with the scars of those strange symbols. She was not catatonic, but likewise she never responded to stimulus on anything more than the most basic level; she would walk if led or stay when placed in a spot, and could feed herself, but that was the extent of her abilities. She constantly chanted to herself every waking hour: strange, unintelligible words that were somehow quite disturbing.

“Some months after her arrival, she began her labor, and I’ve never seen a human being in such pain. Nearly a full day later, she died giving birth to her son, whom we called John Whatley. Her parents were notified, and her father came by train. He was here all of five minutes. He took one look at the baby and walked away without a word, leaving us to give his daughter a state funeral.”

“It would take a hard-hearted man to turn his back on his own grandson,” Boggess remarked.

Whitmore paused to take a final sip of his coffee before setting the cup aside.

“Normally, I would agree with you, Sheriff, but in this case, no.

“The child was hideous – monstrous! To begin with, he was large for a baby, weighing in excess of twenty pounds. His hands and feet were heavily webbed, all the way to the fingertips that, even at birth, were tipped with tiny claws.

“It was the head, though, that was the real horror. It was large and uncommonly broad and flattened, with huge protruding eyes and virtually no chin; his features looked as much like those of a fish or a frog as of a human. The whole effect was added to by his embryonic gills, which had never closed in the womb, nor afterwards. And his mouth! *Good Lord!*” The doctor shuddered, visibly upset for the first time since they had seen him at the crime scene. With a noticeable effort, he pulled his thoughts together. “That mouth was unlike that of any specimen of humanity I’m aware of. Reaching nearly halfway around his head, it was filled with sharp, pointed teeth like those of a shark – rows upon rows of them. Barely out of the birth canal, he opened his mouth to make his first cry, and when I saw the strings of bloody flesh caught between those white spikes, I knew how Sylvia Whately died.

“I had to be certain; as you can imagine, I doubted the evidence of my own senses. As soon as the – the *child* had been given over to a nurse and I had signed the mother’s death certificate, I performed the autopsy myself in the asylum’s operating theater. The operation confirmed my suspicions; John Whately had literally eaten his mother alive from the inside.”

The policemen looked at one another in shocked silence. They wanted to disbelieve what they knew to be impossible, yet it was with a sense of creeping horror that they, as experienced interrogators, could find no hint of falsehood in the old man’s voice and manner as he continued.

“I was quite horrified, yet at the same time, what could I do? I now had responsibility for the child. I was sorely tempted to euthanize him.

Don't look shocked, gentlemen, such things were done back then, and quite often. Curiosity got the better of me though, so instead, I decided to make a study of him, for he was certainly unique. Would to God I had followed my first impulse!

"John Whately grew phenomenally. Within a month he was crawling; by the age of three months he was walking and was as large as an average five year-old. He never learned to actually speak intelligibly – his voice was no more than a horse croak – yet he made sounds with a certain rhythm to them: sounds that were reminiscent of the monotonous chant his mother had made constantly.

"He was hardly more than a year old when he killed the first patient.

"We had another child: a hydrocephalic infant girl who had been abandoned into our care. Both cribs were in the same room, just beside the nurses' station. The night nurse left to make her rounds, and when she returned, she was confronted with the sight of the Whately boy in the other child's crib with what little remained of her. Somehow he had managed to climb out of his own bed and invade hers. To put it bluntly, he ate her – almost entirely stripped her body of soft tissue in less than an hour and appeared to be making an attempt to crack one of her femurs on the edge of the crib, apparently to get at the marrow."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed in thought. Whitmore had just described what had been done to Rick Grimes.

"Two of my staff quit that very night, and in order to keep the others I had to order the boy placed in isolation – a padded cell with a locked door. I visited him daily but could learn nothing. He would ignore toys left with him and simply sat in the corner, chanting that hoarse gibberish endlessly. He spent two years locked in there as I tried to figure out what I had and what I was going to do with him. During that time, he attacked one of the staff, an orderly who was cleaning his cell. The man let his guard down for a minute, and Whately leaped on him like a snake, biting off an ear and two fingers and swallowing them before the man could fight him off.

"Surprisingly, the staffer didn't quit. I admired his pluck, but what I didn't realize was that what I mistook for tenacity was a hunger for vengeance. Two weeks later, on night duty, he dragged the boy from

his cell, took him to a pond that was then on the grounds, tied a sandstone block around his neck, and threw him in.

“When I discovered him missing the next morning, I questioned the entire staff, but to a man they denied any knowledge of his whereabouts, although at least some of them must have known and, most likely, assisted. If anything, rather than looking anxious as one would expect, they looked relieved. It was late that afternoon when I finally found John Whately; he had been under water for at least twelve hours, and he was still alive! Not only alive, but conscious, and he seemed more contented than ever before. Those embryonic gills were still functional, it seemed.

“The water had such a profound calming effect, I began allowing him to swim in the pond on a daily basis as a reward for good behavior. He was a natural swimmer, even at that young age, faster than anyone I had ever seen. I gradually gave him more freedom, and he used it to lull me into a false sense of security. When he was four – already the size of an average twelve year-old – I’d left him in the pond for a moment to turn and answer a question from one of the nurses when we heard a scream. A mongoloid boy had wandered near the pool’s edge, and John Whately shot from the water like a crocodile and dragged him in. By the time we pulled them out, the boy was dying; not from the water in his lungs, but from a series of bites, one of which laid his throat open, severing his carotid artery.

“Whately went back into isolation after that. I hated to do it, but he was simply too dangerous. Deprived of the water he had come to enjoy, he turned more violent than ever.

“Inevitably, it happened. Almost a year later, a local child – a little girl of four – somehow wandered away from home and onto the grounds. I don’t know how Whately got out, but he did. We found what little was left of her pushed under some bushes – no more than gnawed, broken fragments of bone.

“Something had to be done. The girl’s pitiful remains were cremated with our trash; nothing like that could be allowed to get out. We caught John Whately within hours, in his pond, swollen and bloated from his meal. I did what I should have done at the very beginning; I killed him.

“How?” the sheriff asked him.

“I injected him an overdose of sedatives, enough to kill twenty men. The responsibility was mine, but all the staff present were in full agreement. Afterwards, that night, we buried his body in an unmarked grave in the asylum cemetery. Evidently, I underestimated his constitution; he was alive and waiting when those men accidentally dug into his grave.”

“Now wait just a damned minute here!” Smith exploded, red-faced. “I might – *might* – be able to buy this Whately being able to absorb a massive drug overdose, but there’s no way in hell any human being can survive being buried alive for half a century. It’s just not possible.”

Whitmore’s voice never rose.

“You would be quite right, Officer Smith, if John Whately were a human being. Unfortunately, he was not.”

“Doctor,” the sheriff said reasonably. “Regardless of how deformed the subject may have been, he was still...”

Whitmore cut him off.

“No! He was not deformed at all.”

“But you just told us...”

“I told you he was a monster; I never said he was deformed. In fact, during my research on his strange case, I eventually came to realize he looked and acted just like he should, as his father’s son.”

“The rapist looked like *him*?” The trooper asked incredulously.

“Oh yes, and not only the rapist; you see, he was part of an entire race who bore those features.”

Boggess looked at him skeptically.

“Pardon me, Doctor, but exactly what race would that be?”

“One peculiar to the area around Innsmouth, as well as certain isolated islands of the South Pacific. They’re called the Deep Ones, and they are, essentially, fish men, with no immediate ape or other mammalian ancestor in their evolution.” He took a long draw off his cigar before adding, “As you know, the lung fish can survive buried in hibernation for substantial periods of time; apparently those of Whately’s species can do the same.”

Both lawmen looked at each other, wondering if it was the doctor's sanity that was slipping, or their own. Without waiting for them to speak, Whitmore continued.

"There is a very good reason you've never heard of them, other than dim legends and the highly sanitized fairy tales of mermaids; there are things this government has decided, and rightly so in my opinion, that the general public is better off not knowing. It was thought that a strange, dangerous race worshipping an ancient sea god with human sacrifice within our national boundaries was not something for public consumption. That's why, in the early part of this century, Federal Agents, backed up by United States troops and naval vessels destroyed half the town of Innsmouth and either permanently incarcerated or exterminated most of the inhabitants. I say most, because, as was made obvious from the circumstances of Miss Whately's pregnancy, they didn't get them all."

"I remember reading something about that," Smith reluctantly admitted. "It was in some kind of UFO-conspiracy magazine somebody left at the station."

"Yes, but that's all it is now; just another crack-pot conspiracy tale no one takes seriously. After all these years, there's no evidence left, or at least, I didn't think so until now."

The sheriff grunted in frustration. He knew that this explanation was insane; he also knew it was the only one that made any sense, and was therefore probably the right one.

"Doctor Whately, you realize I can't go the people with a story like this don't you?"

The old man nodded in agreement.

"Quite right; they'd laugh you out of town."

"So, what do you suggest?"

"Go with your original thought. The men accidentally broke through a concealed bear's den, and Mr. Grimes fell into it and was fatally savaged. Mr. Bennett is suffering from a hallucination brought on by his oxygen-deprived state during his heart attack; it's not uncommon. You make the proper noises, round up some men and dogs to hunt the non-existent bear, and there will be no problem."

“On the contrary, sir, there’s still the problem of John Whately, who’s still at large.”

“Whately is long gone, sheriff. I suspect you’ll find he made for the river. The sea exerts a call upon his kind, a call that cannot be denied. By now, he’s on his way there, swimming with the current and well out of your jurisdiction. Regardless of your feelings, I think you’ll find a bear much easier to explain.”

It was well past midnight and the sheriff was long gone, but Doctor Whitmore was still awake, sitting in the same comfortable chair, sipping coffee and smoking. He knew his former charge very well, better than any living man, so he was not surprised when he heard the faint sound of stealthy footsteps outside his window. He had hated to mislead Sheriff Boggess, but it was the responsibility of every man to clean up his own mistakes.

As he heard the rattle of the knob and the straining of a weight against the front door, he lifted the old revolver from his lap. It had served him well during the war and it would serve him one final time. Five shots ought to be enough, but if not, he had one more he’d keep back, just in case.

PREY

Luther Clark's few remaining teeth abruptly jammed together and he grunted when the truck bounced in and out of an unseen pothole. Despite the pain in his mouth, he giggled a little. There would be some more bouncing going on soon, although not in the truck; it wouldn't do to leave any extra evidence behind there. Luther didn't have very much in the way of education, but he was a thoughtful man, a careful man, which was why he had been able to keep doing what he'd been doing for so many years without getting caught.

The springs creaked as the old blue Chevy pickup jolted yet again. The asphalt wasn't in particularly good shape up here in the National Forest, that is, where the asphalt was there at all. That and the cold, foggy late afternoon drizzle that seemed to ooze as much as drip out of the gray sky had kept most people away; he had only passed one other car in the past fifteen minutes. That kind of privacy was why Luther came up here; he hated to be interrupted. In fact, that could get damned unhealthy for someone.

Speaking of someone, he gave his passenger a quick glance. She still occupied the same position, curled up in the floorboard where he had left her. Of course, the way she was tied, it would be hard for her to get up, even if she could muster the courage to attempt it. He didn't reckon there was much chance of that.

He didn't know how old she was – probably between seven and nine – but she had pretty blonde hair and, more importantly, she was walking alone along a country road where no little girl had a right to be. Never one to miss an opportunity, Luther had stopped and bundled her in the truck in less than a minute. Once he got her far enough out in the forest, he had plans for this little honey.

"Where are you going?"

"Where the hell do you think?" Deputy Fred Cox replied in disgust as he took his raincoat off the hook in the rural sheriff's office. "You took the call. You know he's got her, and where he's probably taking

her. I've helped gather up too many mutilated bodies; this isn't happening again, not if I've got anything to say about it."

Sheriff Tom Johnson blew out his breath in frustration before sitting down his Styrofoam coffee cup. "Fred, you know *who* he is, damn it! Just let it go!"

"I don't care *who* he is; it's my job to stop this, and that's just what I intend to do. Who somebody is isn't important when it comes to law enforcement."

The Sheriff swore out loud.

"Worst mistake the State ever made, requiring cops to go to the damned academy; you all come back with your heads full of this idealistic bullshit. You all get so wrapped up in law enforcement, you forget what it means to be a peace officer. It makes all the difference in the world *who* he is, and if you had any common sense, you'd know that, and you'd sit right here with the rest of us and have a cup of coffee."

Slipping the bright safety yellow plastic garment on, Fred checked his Glock before slapping his hat on his head and giving his boss a look of utter loathing.

"How many more dead do we need? I'm not just going to sit here while he's out there with her."

"Then you'll be going alone, because that's just what the rest of us are going to do: sit right here. You don't want to listen, then you're on your own."

As he turned off the blacktop and onto the gravel of yet another of the maze of roads leading him deeper into the woods, Luther glanced at the girl again, and he noticed she was still staring at him. They often did that, but her blue eyes were neither squinted with tears nor wide with fear. Instead, she was simply looking, watching.

He frowned. That's all she had done since he grabbed her: no yells, no crying, no begging or struggling, just looking at him. He didn't like that much, preferring to see as well as feel their fear, but after a moment of thinking about it, he decided she must be in shock. That must be it; he had scared her so bad she had just locked up. Comforted

by the thought, he swerved around a fallen branch that lay halfway across the road and drove on with a smile.

This one was just the latest in a string of good luck for him. Usually he had to confine his hunting trips to places far away – *“It’s a dirty bird that shits in his own nest,”* as his mama used to say – but not so much any more. Another predator had begun operating in the area lately, and Luther had taken to opportunity to piggyback onto his activities. Of course their styles were nothing alike; the other guy was not at all particular as to the age or sex of his victims, and he was messy-messy-messy. Luther had heard rumors that he didn’t even have sex with the ones he killed, either before or afterwards. He thought that was a downright waste. Luther wasn’t raised that way; he always made sure he got all the good out of them himself. If the weather was fairly cool and nobody found her, one of his girls would still be good for two weeks or better after the fact, as long as you had plenty of aftershave to cover the smell and weren’t too squeamish, which wasn’t one of Luther’s vices. Still, at least this new slob kept things stirred up and confused so much that Luther was able to operate closer to home with impunity. Of course there were still risks, and some of the cops already suspected him as being one murderer or the other, but he was always careful.

Fred Cox almost lost control of the cruiser as he slammed over the same pothole that Luther had bottomed out in just twenty minutes earlier. He was going at a much higher rate of speed than his quarry had been, much higher than was safe, he knew. He had seen the other bodies, though, and knew only too well what was at stake.

That lone car he had flagged down as it approached earlier had been a godsend. The driver, a fisherman who had finally given up trying to catch anything in the increasingly cold, gloomy day, confirmed that a blue Chevy pickup had gone by him only a few minutes before. Fred had punched the gas, leaving a trail of burnt rubber behind in way too much of a hurry to thank him.

Through the intermittent swishing of the wiper blades as they tried to clear away the greasy mist, he saw the gravel turnoff ahead. Slowing to a stop, he rolled down the window looking for signs that anyone had

passed this way recently, and spotted the fresh tire tracks past the mud hole at the entrance. Twisting the wheel, he whipped the cruiser around and headed down the rough unpaved road, rolling up his window as he went.

Luther found the dirt road as much by the garbage dumped at its mouth as by the half-hidden pair of muddy tacks themselves. They headed to the left and he shifted into four-wheel drive before turning carefully onto them, straddling the dividing weeds. He went a couple of hundred yards, branches scraping against the sides and roof of his truck as he slowly worked his way along until he came to a clearing. It was one of his favorite spots: woods on three sides and a steep bank leading into a deep ravine on the other, opposite from the entrance.

He stopped and turned off the ignition, leaving the engine popping as it cooled. Opening the door, he reached into the floorboard and caught the girl by her bound arm and pulled her into the seat before dragging her out with him.

“Oh honey, me and you are gonna have a time, yes sir. We’re gonna have us a time!”

Grabbing a handful of her hair so she wouldn’t be able to run, he pulled the hunting knife from his belt and stooped, cutting the clothesline that bound her wrists and ankles. Even though he could clearly see the red marks and indentations the cord had left in her skin, she never made a move to rub it. It was the shock, he reckoned, or maybe she was retarded or something. Keeping his grip on her hair with his left hand, Luther ordered her to strip. It was at this point the begging and crying and shaking always began in earnest, but not this time. She simply began pulling her clothes off like it was the most natural thing in the world until she stood naked, still staring at him with those flat blue eyes. Her only reaction seemed to be the goose bumps on her skin in the cold air. Something nagged at him that, shock or not, this couldn’t be right, but as he ran his eyes up and down her slender white body, he stopped worrying about it and reached for the fastenings of his pants. His jacket was in the way, so he began unzipping it first, and had the brass tongue halfway down when he heard the voice.

“Freeze! Sheriff’s Department!”

Startled, Luther raised his head to find himself looking down the barrel of a 12 gauge riot gun in the hands of Fred Cox, barely thirty feet away. The deputy had parked his cruiser across the mouth of the dirt track and had walked in, hoping to surprise him, and he had obviously succeeded. Luther couldn't believe it, he'd been so careful...

"Step away from the girl! *Do it now!*"

Luther realized two things just then. One was that the cop couldn't shoot if he was standing that close to the girl, especially not with a shotgun, without taking a chance of hitting them both with the scattering load of double-ought buckshot. The other was that he had his old .357 magnum in his jacket pocket. Fred's eyes dropped towards the girl for just an instant, and that was all the time Luther needed. He didn't even pull the gun out of his pocket for the first shot, just grabbed it and fired through his jacket.

The hollow point bullet caught the deputy low in the abdomen, shattering his pelvis. He jerked and fell to the side with a shocked cry, and the shotgun went off in the air when he hit the ground. Not giving him a chance to pump in another round or to draw his pistol, Luther pulled the gun out of his tattered, smoking pocket and fired again, hitting him in the chest as he lay there. Still holding the girl's hair almost as an afterthought so she couldn't get away, he dragged her along with him to the cop's body.

Surprisingly, Fred Cox was still alive, at least for the moment. He looked up at Luther, eyes full of confusion and betrayal.

"I was trying to help you," he rasped, then coughed, the bright red lung blood bubbling from his lips.

Luther was startled, then his eyes narrowed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

After a moment, he realized that Fred's eyes breathing had stopped, and whatever the hell the cop had been trying to say, he wasn't going to find out. This made him angry, and he fired a third shot in frustration, this time into the deputy's groin. Cox was way past feeling the impact or anything else, and his body never moved.

Luther swore violently; this complicated the hell out of things. He had no idea whether the cop had called for backup, but figured he probably had; they almost always did. He had to get out of here pronto,

which meant his fun would have to wait. Shaking his head, he thought about the waste. Such a pretty little thing, but no time to enjoy her now, and he'd be running too hard to take her along. Of course, leaving her behind to be able to identify him later never entered his mind.

He shrugged. Needs must when the devil drives, he reckoned. Still holding her hair, he began turning with his pistol in his hand when things suddenly went wrong. Something cold bumped hard against his wrist, and he looked down in time to see the .357 fall from his fingers that suddenly could no longer hold it for some reason. It took him several seconds to realize what was in front of his eyes. He wasn't looking at his wrist but into it, as the skin and flesh had been parted and peeled back like hamburger, and he could see the white bone beneath, and blood spurting out rhythmically in time with the pulse that was pounding through his temples. His hand dangled, a limp, dead piece of meat.

He looked at the girl, only she was no longer there; instead, what he was still holding by the hair was something else entirely. Her body hadn't enlarged exactly, but had instead grown muscular, like that of a wild animal, and her naked white flesh was now hidden beneath a thick growth of light brown fur. Her fingers ended in long curved claws, and blood dripped from the ones on her right hand, where she had laid open his wrist. Her nose had widened and lifted, and her mouth extended and enlarged until had she now had a muzzle. It wrinkled as she looked hungrily at him, and her lips curled up to show impossibly long, ivory canine teeth. Her eyes blazed as blue as a gas flame.

A lot of things became crystal clear to Luther in that last instant before she snarled and leapt for his face, quick as a weasel.

Sheriff Johnson slipped the little black band off his badge and tossed it into his top drawer. "I'm damned glad that's over. I hate cop funerals."

"Me too," his dispatcher told him. "Fred might have been hard-headed, but he was a good guy."

"Fred had his head up his ass," the sheriff replied matter-of-factly. "All of us have been on the quiet lookout for that girl for two months now. He had to know that we'll find her sooner or later, but if she was

going to take care of one of our other big problems for us, I preferred later. As far as I'm concerned, kid-raping, murdering sons of bitches like Luther Clark fall outside the boundaries of who I'm supposed to *'protect and serve'*. He was the one who kidnapped her, but Fred couldn't see that letting her have him was nothing more than simple justice."

"Yeah, I know, but he was young and idealistic; at least his heart was in the right place."

"So was Luther Clark's." The remark and its deadpan delivery set them both laughing, and was quickly to become a standing joke around the office. As far as the cops were concerned, Luther Clark's heart had been in exactly the right place: right where they found it, caught in the branches twenty feet up a pine tree where it had been thrown when she tore him apart.

NIGHT MARCH

The Shenandoah Valley; October, 1864

Jim Wright woke up on his back, drowning in blood. Flailing his arms in a panic, he rolled to his side as his convulsing windpipe heaved out a scarlet flood from between his dry, tattered lips. He alternately hacked and wheezed as his body tried to simultaneously expel the fluid blocking his windpipe and take in the air it was literally dying for.

Suddenly a strong hand seized his shoulder and forcibly turned him face down in the wet grass while its partner thumped him soundly between the shoulder blades.

“It’ll be alright, boy! Jes’ cough it out. It’ll be alright.”

With one hand still securing his shoulder and the heel of the other pounding his back, Jim had little choice in the matter, and within a few seconds the flood slowed to a trickle and his breathing, though still ragged, was no longer desperate. He coughed fitfully as the hands rolled him back over.

“Damn, boy! You’ a mess.”

He felt like a mess. Every part of his body hurt as though he had been beaten with a club and a nauseating pain was devouring the right side of his head from his ear and along his jaw to the inside of his mouth, where he could still taste the rich copper salt of his own blood. When he tried to gaze up at his rescuer, his heart skipped a beat for fear that he had been blinded as well, but after a moment he realized he could see, at least out of his left eye; the right one was crusted shut. What threw him off was the darkness; when he last remembered, it had been late afternoon.

He could make out most of the details of the stranger by the full moon’s light, but the orb’s glare lent the scene a sense of unreality. It was obvious the man was a bushwhacker – a guerrilla: tall, lean and hungry-looking. A long, tattered butternut-dyed overcoat hung over an equally ragged gray uniform that matched Jim’s own in color if not condition, giving him the appearance of military scarecrow. Even in the

low light, he could see the clothes were covered with dirt, leaves, and forest debris. Little could be seen of the man's face; the lower half, under the long nose, was concealed beneath a thick beard. Dark, shoulder-length hair framed his prominent cheekbones, while a broad-brimmed hat shaded the rest. Strangely his eyes were readily visible; in fact they seemed to blaze with an unnatural glow almost like an animal's from the shadow of the brim. When he spoke, his lips hardly seemed to move, at least that Jim could see.

"Keep your voice quiet," he whispered. "They's still Yankees about." The man looked him over with those intense eyes. "Have you got a canteen?"

"Yessir. It's right here." In fact, he could feel it digging into his kidneys where he had rolled over on it. As he shifted around to reach for it the stranger beat him to it, deftly freed it from its strap and produced a stained handkerchief from within his coat pocket.

"Hold real still, son. This is likely to hurt."

As the capable, business-like hands began swabbing at his face with the disreputable scrap of rag soaked in the canteen's water, it did hurt, but Jim managed to bear up under it, and soon the man had cleaned the wound and freed his right eye from its crust of blood and mucous. The stranger rocked back on his heels and silently studied his handiwork.

"Well, how is it?" Jim finally asked with some trepidation as his curiosity got the better of him.

"I reckon you'll live," he replied curtly, "but you' gonna' have one hell of a nasty scar. You' got a cut that runs from the back of your head to right near the corner of your mouth; took the top o' your ear plumb off an' cut through the inside of your cheek. I see a couple o' teeth a' layin' there in that blood you first spit out. Saber?"

"I reckon, but I don't know for sure. They caught us crossin' the field an' hit us with a cavalry charge. I was bayonettin' a Yankee off his horse, last I recall. He had a saber drawn back in his hand, but that's all I can remember."

"You' lucky you remember anything, boy. That damned blue-belly like to cut your head off! Can you stand?"

At his nod in the affirmative, the stranger effortlessly rose to his feet and extended his hand. As Jim reached up for it, he noticed the

assortment of pistols and knives jutting from his worn belt in a violent bouquet. There was no long gun in sight; evidently he liked to do his killing close-up.

The guerrilla's palm was hard and cold as he pulled the young man to his feet, and steadied him until he stopped swaying. As Jim raised one hand to his head, his benefactor scooped up a battered felt hat.

"This'n yours?"

Jim nodded and donned it, taking care that it didn't touch his injured ear.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you kindly."

"I know where there's a Southern camp." He didn't seem to hear the infantryman's expression of gratitude. "I'll take you back there."

"I'm with company A. Do you know where they're camped at?"

The man gave him a sad nod.

"Yeah, boy. They' all around us."

Until then, Jim hadn't paid any attention to his surroundings, but now that he looked, he could make out the still, lumpish forms scattered about in the dewy grass of the hillside. The moonlight lent them even more pallor than death's paleness, until their blank faces seemed to glow in the darkness. He recognized most of them of course, at least those that could still be recognized; boys he'd grown up with and men from around the county. Near his feet lay Junior Wilkins, his own age, who sat beside him in the school house and the church pew: all of seventeen with a round, blue-edged hole big enough to put your thumb in right beside his nose. Off to the left was Sergeant Pethel, the town blacksmith, his huge, calloused hands still clutching at the coils of intestines that spilled from his torn stomach and stretched across the ground like a string of sausages, and his dead mouth frozen in a rictus of pain. And over there...

It was too much. He sucked in his breath and smelled blood and burned powder, cooling flesh and torn bowels, then turned his gaze skyward and gulped hard, fighting the nausea.

"Who all's left?"

"Ain't nobody left, 'cept you. Sorry, boy."

Jim shook his head in disbelief.

"They can't all be dead! Didn't nobody git away or surrender?"

The older man spat on the ground. "Them Yankees wasn't takin' no surrenders today. The ones that stood their ground are a'layin' right here, an' there's a trail of them as tried to run leadin' all the way over to them woods yonder." He gestured toward a deeper patch of blackness downhill toward the east. "They caught the last one not a stone's throw from the trees. One of them cavalrymen musta' sharpened his saber, 'cause he took his head clean off." He spat again. "Sons o' bitches!"

Jim closed his eyes tightly as he fought back the tears. "Oh Lord..."

"I don't reckon the Lord had a whole lot to do with this day's work. Come on, boy, you can grieve later. We need to git gone afore any o' them Yankees take it into their head to come back an' go souvenir huntin'." He picked up the boy's rifle lying nearby and eyed the bayonet critically before handing it to Jim.

"Ye got him, alright; she's bloody clear to the socket. Good work; now load 'er and let's go. Ain't nothin' more we kin do here."

Numbly the younger man obeyed. No sooner than he returned him ramrod to its resting place, the guerrilla began walking away, motioning for him to follow. After two steps Jim suddenly stopped, halted by a grunting noise and a rustling in the grass several yards off to his right. Dimly he could make out shape and movement, as if someone were crawling on his hands and knees.

"Wait! There's somebody still alive!" He had already started toward the noise when the stranger's hand clamped down on his arm like a vice.

"Don't go over there. You don't wanna' see that."

"But there's somebody..."

The man shook his head.

"That ain't nobody. That's hogs, boy; ever time there's a fight, they come down outta the woods to git their bellies full. Come on. Ain't nothin' we kin do. Either the Yankees'll go round up some niggers to bury 'em, or else nature'll do it. Either way, I reckon it's all the same in the end."

With that, he turned and headed South and, after a moment, Jim followed.

Jim was staggering in a near-delirium as the stars began to dim in the east. The night had been like the long march to Hell of a damned, agonized soul led by a silent demon who never spoke except to order quiet when the hoof-beats of even worse demons sounded in the distance. Every step sent a throbbing spear of pain through his wounded jaw, and his ruined ear felt like it had a hot coal perched on the tip that was no longer there. First he sweated, feverish from his wound, then chilled as the autumn wind blew around him. Head hanging with exhaustion, he actually ran into his guide when the guerrilla stopped suddenly, and he murmured an apology that was answered with a distant grunt.

“Looks like our boys have moved further than I thought. We need to find us a place to lay up through the day – I don’t like to travel then, and you won’t make it much further anyway. They used to be an ol’ homestead over that way; lets go see if we kin hide there.”

When they reached the place, they passed by the blackened ruins of the house. It and all of the outbuildings had been put to the torch by the Northern invaders weeks before, leaving only the chimney standing like a forlorn tombstone over the cold ashes. The faint smell of smoke still lingered, as did the smell of carrion. A fat possum, his fur a ghostly white in the moonlight, waddled hurriedly away from shrunken remains of a family cow, shot in her pen.

Within a few minutes the stranger found what he was looking for; a tiny household coal mine sank into the side of the hill. Only reaching back a few yards, it was little more than a crawl space without even enough room to sit straight up in, but it served their needs. Entering just as the first hints of a red sun colored the sky, they scooted back feet first to the end of it. The stranger bundled up his coat into a long roll for their pillow.

“Rest as ye kin, boy, but whatever happens, don’t leave this hole. We don’t want the Yankees findin’ us.”

Jim barely heard him. Exhausted, he went to sleep beside the man as soon as his head hit the makeshift pillow.

“Come on, boy, let’s rise an’ shine.”

Blinking into wakefulness at the motion of the stranger wiggling past him, he followed groggily, a foul taste in his mouth. By the time he reached the entrance, his companion was standing there, surveying the surrounding landscape in the fading light, as the last traces of the sunset's glow painted the dark sky with bloody streaks. Jim could see more of the man's face now, and it looked unnaturally pale and drawn, with deep lines etched around the eyes. As he straightened up and uncapped his canteen, the thought occurred to him that he didn't even know his savior's name.

"I'm Private Jim Wright." He offered the canteen before drinking himself, but it was waved away.

"Pleased to meet you," the man muttered through lips that barely parted. Despite the hint, he never offered his own name. Although his attitude was almost rudely quiet, he seemed full of nervous energy and eager to get moving. As Jim watched, the man not only looked and listened, but his nostrils widened as he sniffed the air like a hound dog.

Raising his hand, he pointed a long, dirt-encrusted fingernail toward the woods east of them.

"That way."

Turning his back on the remnant of the dying day, he stepped off without another word, leaving Jim to follow as best he could.

The march was nearly a duplicate of the one the night before, only Jim, with the resilience of youth, had regained much of his strength and was aware of his surroundings as they tramped along, his heavy rifle slung over his shoulder. Their path was only reasonably straight when they were in the deep forest, at least as straight as the meandering deer trails and hog paths would allow. Whenever they came to a field, though, the stranger would make wide detours around it, sticking to the concealing shadows of bordering trees and fencerows and avoiding the open moonlight. Still, the bearded Rebel set a strong pace, and they covered a lot of ground.

A breeze came up, and the falling leaves swirled on its wings like bats, flying for a while before gently rustling to the ground. That, and their feet crunching through them made the only sound.

It was nearly midnight when Jim's guide stopped abruptly as they neared the edge where the woods bordered on yet another pasture field,

and turned and laid his fingers across the younger soldier's lips before he could speak. He raised his right hand, and Jim followed the direction of his pointing finger. After several seconds, he could barely pick out a figure standing on a small rise of ground under a big hickory where the woods gave way to grass nearly a hundred feet away. It looked vaguely like a man, but he couldn't tell for sure.

His companion, however, had no doubt.

"That's a Yankee picket," the man breathed in his ear, as soft as a night breeze. "I'll take care of him, so's we can pass through the lines." Where the other's body touched him as he leaned close to whisper, Jim could feel a trembling that somehow seemed more like anticipation than fear. "Wait here till I come back for you."

Before the soldier could respond, the guerrilla stepped away, a cloud passed across the moon, and he vanished in the darkness. Try as he might, Jim could neither see him nor mark his progress by any sound. It was as if he had simply disappeared.

Since he couldn't see the stalker, he decided to watch the prey. He found that by turning so he looked beside the enemy sentry he could make the man out easily enough against the comparative lightness of the open field beyond, but when he tried to stare right at him, the figure seemed to disappear.

With no warning, another figure was there, merging with the Yankee sentry so quickly that Jim, startled, looked directly at them, then cursed to himself when he couldn't see anything. Shifting his gaze again, he could now only make out a small hump on the ground that hadn't been there before. Throughout the whole process, there had been no sound.

Curiosity overcame him, and, slowly and carefully, he began to ease forward.

As he quietly wound his way through the trees, the moon appeared again and the image became clearer. The hump was the two men, locked together in a stiff, quivering embrace that looked almost sexual, with the Confederate on top. There was a slurping gurgle, like sorghum poured too fast from a jug, and a soft moaning that was neither agony nor ecstasy, but a little of both. Jim felt the hair rising up on his neck as

he realized that the noise was not coming from the Yankee at all, but from the stranger.

Slowly, after what seemed to be an eternity, the man rose, his back toward Jim.

"I asked you to wait." The barely audible voice was a simple statement, not an admonishment. There was no anger in it, only a hint of sadness.

"I thought you might be hurt." Even to him, the whispered excuse for his curiosity sounded lame and hollow.

He looked down at the dead man. The corpse lay spread-eagled on its back, head thrown back, mouth gaping, and eyes bulging with horror. In the moonlight, the Yankee's face looked pale and bloodless against the collar of the dark blue wool of his uniform. Dark droplets winked on his torn throat, twinkling like the dew in the reflected light.

"How did you..."

"Hush. We kin talk later; right now, we need to git through these lines. That feller wasn't out here by his self."

They maneuvered cautiously through the shadows for another hour, pausing frequently to listen to something that Jim couldn't hear for the life of him, before the stranger relaxed.

"Alright," he announced with a touch of resignation in his voice and his back still toward the younger man. "We're through. There's a bunch of Southrons camped up a holler just about five hundred yards ahead. You better call out when you git close; you don't want to come all this way jus' to git shot by your own pickets."

Jim was dumfounded.

"Ain't you comin'?"

"Naw, I reckon not."

"Why?"

"Well," He mumbled, still facing away. "I reckon the best way to put it is that I jus' don't fit in anymore. I fight on my own now."

Jim removed his battered hat and scratched his head.

"I can't say you ain't good at it. How did you kill that Yankee picket back there so quiet-like, anyway?"

"It's a little trick I picked up at the prison camp on Johnson's Island. I learned it the hard way, from a Yankee guard." His voice,

though not loud, was like an impending storm, heralded by the distant rumble of thunder. "Bastards like him thrive in a damn prison.

"He jumped me one night, when I stepped outside the barracks after curfew. I had the runs an' I was slippin' for the outhouse, when, next thing I knowed, that son of a bitch was on me. I just had time to recognize him an' realize what was happening, a'fore I passed out.

"He took me for dead, an' they hauled me out in a pine box an' buried me." His voice began to rise. "Do you know what it's like, boy, wakin' up in the bottom of a grave, nothin' but darkness all around you?" Looking at his back, Jimmy saw him shiver, even in the dim light. "*God almighty!*

"Lucky for me, they used rotten wood for the coffin and didn't bury me too deep. I dug my way out of there, boy. I used my hands, I used my fingernails, I even used my teeth! I dug my way out, yes sir, and then I tracked down an' killed that Yankee son of a bitch that put me there!"

Something in the man's tone made Jim suspect that particular Yankee's death was neither pleasant nor particularly fast in coming.

"Then I turned around an' walked the hell away from there. I headed back to the South an' to the war. After...what happened, I couldn't be reg'lar army no more, so I took to the bush. I do my fightin' there now."

"But," Jim persisted, "you still haven't told me how you did it. That looks like a handy skill for a soldier. Could you teach me how?"

"*No!*" he hissed. "Boy, you'd better pray to God that's one thing you *never* learn how to do!"

The guerrilla finally turned to face him. Even in the dim light, Jim could see his once-pale complexion was now ruddy and flushed, and clots of drying blood caked his beard and stained his shirtfront.

"Now you go on, boy. Your place is up there. Mine is out here, an' the night ain't over yet; not by a damn sight!"

"But...I don't understand."

In answer, the stranger threw back his head and yawned wide, and Jim felt his knees go weak as he staggered backward at the sight. The hair rose on the back of his neck; he couldn't breathe and he thought he was going to faint with fear.

The guerrilla's mouth was an unnaturally wide cavern where long ivory fangs gleamed like wolf's teeth under the moon. The familiar stench of blood wafted from him in an overpowering wave.

Jim's own mouth hung open at the shocked realization of exactly what his rescuer was, and he shook uncontrollably, although not from cold.

The guerrilla simply closed his mouth and nodded once. With that, he turned and walked back the way they had come, and the young man stood frozen and watched him go until he vanished in the darkness.

NOBODY SITS THERE

“What do you mean, nobody sits there?”

Randal Boggs never was quite right: a bad seed some folks said. He was a mean little bastard is what he was, from the time he was born. He was mean to animals, mean to other kids, just plain mean. He got older and he got meaner until he almost killed that Pearson boy in a fight when he was seventeen. Judge Thomas told him he'd give him an outlet for his aggression; unless he wanted to pull about ten hard ones in the state pen, Randal was going to the Marines. The Marines knew a good thing when they saw it, and packed him off to Vietnam for two tours.

Well, a tour and a half. Nobody ever knew exactly what it was Randal did, but they shipped him home early. A lot of people blamed the war and whatever went on over there for what was to happen here, but not the ones who knew him. We knew what he was and always figured it was just a matter of time.

He wound up marrying Cindy Rawles, who'd never had a brain in her head to start with, and what little sense she had, he soon knocked out of her. She said she was just clumsy, but nobody is that awkward to hurt themselves that often. Once they had kids – Billy and Becky – they must have taken after her for clumsiness, because they were always banged up as bad as she was. Sometimes they “fell and hurt themselves” so bad they didn't come out of the house for days.

Everybody talked about how it was a shame, and how back in the old days, the Klan would have taught Randal a lesson that was long overdue. However, this wasn't the old days and the Klan was long gone, and everybody was too shit-scared of that little psychopath to do squat. If you wanted to get through to Randall, you'd have to kill him, because he'd get you one way or another if you didn't. I reckon we weren't prepared to go quite that far. Looking back, I really wish we had.

It was on October 12th, 1979, in the third booth on the left at Big Bill's Burgers, that Randal Boggs finally lost it.

Nobody ever knew what set him off. He was sitting there with his family, eating in silence as usual. He finished the last of his cheeseburger, washed it down with a drink of coke, and then reached inside his old ratty field jacket and pulled out a .45 automatic.

"Cindy," he said: just her name, nothing else.

She looked up, or at least raised her head. It was hard to tell if she was really looking at him or not, since she'd been clumsy again and was wearing a pair of dark sunglasses so you couldn't see her eyes. I remember her face though, how she never seemed to change expression when he stuck that .45 across the table and shot her right in the forehead.

Her head snapped backwards over the seatback before falling forward again, face down in her onion rings and ketchup.

Beside her, eight year-old Billy glanced up, looking more curious than surprised, really, and his father shot him through the left eye. He fell back against the wall and slid down under the table.

Little Becky was between Randal and the wall, and didn't have anywhere to go. She screamed and covered her face, but a five year-old's hands won't stop a full metal jacketed slug. She died right there, wedged into the corner.

Old lady Henderson in the booth across from them looked over at him like she was shocked by his bad manners, giving him a look like she would have had for somebody farting in church. Randal turned, never getting out of his seat, and shot her next. The bullet went right through her turkey-wattled neck, busted the window behind her and blew the passenger headlight out of Larry Tucker's brand new pickup parked outside.

By that time, everybody else had run for it, and that bloodthirsty son of a bitch turned back and shot blind, right through the wall and into the kitchen. That one didn't hit anybody, but it punched a hole in the deep fryer and the grease scalded the hell out of Mary Jeffers' leg; she can still show you the scar.

We saw the whole thing while we crouched down between two cars out in the parking lot, and we watched as Randal Boggs did what

somebody should have done a long time ago; turned that pistol around, put it under his chin, and blew his brains all over the ceiling.

I'll never forget that sound when we came back inside: that drip-drip-drip like rain coming down on the table...

"Hey, I'm Randal Boggs," the pimply-faced teenager in the letterman jacket proclaimed loudly as he broke away from the group and slid into the booth. He spat out an enormous wad of well-chewed pink bubblegum into a plastic spoon. "This is my brain. And this is my brain..." he continued, bending the spoon down and letting it snap back, sending the gum smacking audibly against the acoustic tile overhead, "...on the ceiling!"

The other boy howled with laughter that had a decidedly nervous undertone, and the girl's responded with a chorus of, "Oh, gross!" The boy with the gum was laughing, but quickly slid out of the seat as if it had become hot. The noise died as they glanced up and saw Rich Dawson, Big Bill's Burgers manager, staring at them, his lips set tightly in irritation. Shamefaced, they filed out without a word until they reached the door, then their laughter broke loose again as they rushed out, the boys playfully shoving each other.

Dawson heaved a sigh as he climbed up, stepping first on the hard plastic seat and then the tabletop, and pulled the gum loose with a napkin.

"You see what I mean, Mr. Gill?" He spoke to the man next to him as he stepped back down and dropped the wad in the trash. "That's the only use this booth ever gets. Nobody sits down here for a meal, at least no body local. It's a target for vandalism on a dare; we've had to replace the seats and tabletop I don't know how many times, and we must have gone through a dozen ceiling tiles right above it. It would be cheaper to take it out entirely, maybe put in a planter or something."

Harold Gill, Big Bill's Burgers' district manager, gave Dawson a baleful glare. The men were a study in contrasts. Dawson was tall and slightly overweight with the too-short haircut and too-small moustache that screamed "fast food restaurant manager." Gill was short, burly, and his premature white hair showed him to be twice Dawson's age.

“So you’re telling me you want to put up a memorial to remind people of something that this company has been trying to make everyone forget for the past ten years?”

“Not a memorial,” Dawson insisted for what had to be the third time. “Just something else in place of this booth.”

“Hrumph. Same thing. Do you remember your training, Dawson?”

“Yes Mr. Gill.”

“What are the Big Bill’s Burger primary standards?”

“Cleanliness, service, affordability, and quality across the system-”

“Exactly. *Across the system* means uniformity; every one of our restaurants are the same – *every* one. No matter what Big Bill’s Burger a customer goes into, anywhere in the country, from California to Kalamazoo, it’s *exactly* the same as every other one. Uniformity, Dawson: that’s the key to efficiency and customer comfort.”

“But sir, I’m talking about customer comfort: the local customers, this restaurant’s primary customer base. As far as they’re concerned, this is not an ordinary situation.”

“On the contrary, it *is* an ordinary situation. Every situation is ordinary as long as we don’t let it become something else. You let it do that, Dawson; this whole situation is a result of your poor management.”

The manager stared open-mouthed and felt his face growing red with anger. He mentally counted to three before answering, and the heat was still evident in his voice.

“Now just a minute! I wasn’t manager when this happened; as a matter of fact, if you’ll check your records, you’ll see that I’m the *fourth* manager since then. I didn’t create this situation; I inherited it.”

“Bull shit!” Gill declared, his raised voice causing some of the patrons to look curiously in his direction. “I don’t care what you’ve inherited; you’ve done nothing to alleviate it, so that makes it your fault, as far as I’m concerned, and I’m the one that matters.”

“I was trying to alleviate it and you just arbitrarily cut that option off to me.”

“You weren’t trying to alleviate it; you were trying to coddle it and memorialize it. I won’t have it, and the company won’t have it.” He

threw his briefcase onto the offending table before turning back to the manager and pointing his finger at him.

"The decision is final." Dawson opened his mouth, but Gill cut him off. "And one more word out of you on the subject, and you're fired."

Dawson shut his mouth with a snap. His fists clenched involuntarily, aching to stretch the district manager out on the tile floor, but he thought of his pregnant wife and all their outstanding bills. Nostrils flaring and not trusting himself to speak, he abruptly spun on his heel and stalked back to the kitchen.

Gill snorted derisively. Managers like Dawson were a dime a dozen: gutless wonders, always backing down.

Several of the locals, trying to listen without looking like it, were aghast when Gill sat down in the booth, right in the same spot where Randal Boggs had sat, and popped open his case. He dragged out his evaluation forms and began marking them, pressing his pen down almost savagely with far more force than necessary. He ignored the customers and their flurry of whispers until he realized one of them was standing beside him when a shadow fell across his papers and stayed there. Frowning, he looked up to see a dark-haired boy of about eight staring at him. Something about the kid made Mr. Gill very uncomfortable. It might have been his looks; his face was abnormally flat, almost as if he had been hit with a shovel.

"Can I help you?"

Solemnly the dark head nodded, eyes large and unblinking.

"Well? What is it?"

"You don't want to sit there."

Gill blew out his breath. *Just what I need; another idiot.* Still, it was obvious the kid wasn't going anywhere until he responded.

"Why not?"

The kid gulped, looking surprised.

"That's Randal Boggs seat," he said, as if that explained everything.

"Son, Randal Boggs is dead and gone."

He shook his head solemnly.

"He might be dead, but he ain't gone. Ain't you afraid to be sittin' in his place?"

“No, I’m not afraid of Randal Boggs or anyone else. Now if you don’t mind, I’ve got work to do.” Gill turned away to his papers and the kid evidently took the hint, because when he glanced that way a few seconds later, the boy was gone. Everybody in the restaurant was staring at him, though, and they hastily averted their eyes when he looked up. He could almost taste their fear.

This whole damned place is an asylum!

Up at the counter, Marvin Handley frantically motioned Rich Dawson out of the back. Still angry after his encounter with Gill, the manager’s voice was louder than usual.

“Yeah, Marv? What can I do for you?”

Dawson glanced meaningfully towards the booth out of sight around the corner of the aisle before whispering urgently.

“It happenin’ again!”

“What is?”

“You know damned well what! He’s sittin’ *there!*”

Dawson noticed the other customers leaving the restaurant, either carrying their half-eaten food in their hands or else leaving it behind on the table. The place was emptying out quickly.

“There’s nothing I can do about it. Maybe nothing will happen this time.”

“That’s *horse shit* Marv, and you know it. He’s over there talkin’ and there ain’t nobody there! Nobody anyone can *see*, anyway,” he amended with a shiver.

Thinking about his own bruised and battered ego, the manager’s face went hard.

“To hell with him then.”

It had been a long, aggravating day already, and the harder he started at them, the more the lines on the forms seemed determined to run together in a hopeless jumble. Gill raised his glasses up onto his forehead and pinched the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb. He was on the verge of a headache, and was suddenly so very, very tired. He closed his eyes for a second –

– and opened them in Hell.

The ground was bone-dry red clay mixed with ash, cracked open in a crazy quilt pattern like mud during a drought. Fire licked up through some of the cracks, clawing at the sky with hot fingers, and boiling blood ran in rivers through others, scummy, splashing and stinking. The sky was black and shot through with scarlet lightning, and caustic sulfurous smoke filled the air and burned his lungs like teargas when he breathed.

Gill coughed and jerked his head back and forth, his eyes wide. As the billows of smoke and steam wafted like ghosts, he tried to see where he was. The only sign of life was death; dead trees and dead bones and the crushed carcasses of dead cars poking up out of the brick-hard red soil. Dark, twisted shadows scurried like furtive rats, running this way and that at the corners of his vision, but he couldn't quite focus on them.

"I told you, mister."

He spun at the sound of the voice behind him. It was the dark haired, flat-faced boy again, standing there with his hands in his pockets, looking for all the world like it was a normal day.

Maybe it was...for him. Gill choked at that thought, sounding like a TB patient bringing up a blood clot.

"I warned you. You done got him mad now."

"Who?" Gill demanded, his voice no more than a squeak.

"Randal Boggs."

He jumped at the second voice, a woman this time, again behind him, come out of nowhere, just like the boy. Twisting, he looked at her. She might have been good looking once, but somewhere along the line someone had broken her nose multiple times, and had split her lips and the skin over her cheekbones. When she opened her mouth to speak, he saw her jaw was lopsided and she was missing half her teeth.

"He's my husband. You hadn't ought to get him mad."

"Yeah," came a third voice, and Gill turned once more, to see a little girl clutching a one-eyed rag doll with cotton stuffing hanging from its empty socket. "Daddy can get real mean when he gets mad."

"No," the district manager said, backing away from the trio. "This can't be happening!"

The woman shook her head sadly.

"It's happening, mister. It's *always* happening."

The boy nodded, and the little girl turned and pointed.

"Look; here comes daddy now."

At the sight of the man in black striding across the wasted landscape, Gill turned and fled as fast as his legs would go.

It was like a nightmare, where, despite the dry ground, it was felt as if his feet were stuck in deep mud. The ground held onto him, retarding his steps like thick glue. The approaching man was not affected, and strode purposefully towards him, his worn cowboy boots kicking up puffs of dust. Gill glanced back, saw the dark hair and cruel smile, and strained even harder.

Before he realized it, a hand grabbed his shoulder and slung him down. His elbow went numb when he landed on it, and he saw stars as his head bounced from the impact.

"Goin' somewhere, ass-wipe?"

Gill tried to scuttle away on his back but the man's boot connected with his shin and he screamed as he heard the bone crack.

"Come on, pussy," Randal said, this time stomping down on his ankle, sending waves of shooting agony up his leg. The smile never left his attacker's face. "Come on, you faggot! I thought you weren't afraid of me."

"I am! I am!" Rolling in pain, Gill was screaming as the boot kept coming, and tears were running down his face.

"You are? (kick) You really afraid, huh? (kick) How afraid are you?"

"Oh God, mister! I'm more afraid than I've ever been in my life."

"*God?*" Randall snarled. He bent over and grabbed two handfuls of the district manager's suit, yanking him to his knees. He shoved his face almost against Gill's, and the hot breath wafting from his mouth stank like an open grave. Looking into Randall Boggs' face, he saw that his tormentor's pupils didn't end at the back of his eyes but went on forever, and Gill was horrified to realize that there were *things* moving in the darkness of those twin abysses, looking back at him from inside. "*I'm God here, you son of a bitch! This is my world; I made it! I'm God here!*"

“I-where-” His voice cut off abruptly when Randal slapped him across the face with his open hand. Gill’s head rocked back so hard his neck cracked audibly.

“Inside my head, moron. I put what was inside outside, now I can pull what’s outside in, and then put some of the inside out again!”

“I don’t understand...”

A second slap, this one with the back of Boggs’ hand, split his lips and jerked his head in the opposite direction.

“You don’t have to *understand*, ass-wipe. *I’ll* do the understanding here! All you have to do is *listen*! You gonna listen to me, boy?”

“Yes sir! Please, just don’t hurt me!”

“Hurt you?” Randal grabbed Gill by the cheek and twisted painfully until the district manager moaned. “I ain’t gonna hurt you, ass-wipe; you and me, we’re gonna be real close friends – real close! You might even say, flesh of one flesh.”

As Gill realized what he meant, he opened his mouth to scream –

– and his eyes popped open.

He looked down at the papers before him on the table, and for some reason they suddenly infuriated him. In fact, everything infuriated him.

I am so sick of this shit!

With a grunt, he stuck his open briefcase below the lip of the tabletop, swept everything into it, and slammed it closed, heedless of the crumpling paperwork. Then he stood up and headed toward the door.

Handley, still talking with the restaurant manager, saw him coming, took one look, and scuttled out of the way. Dawson, who had finally managed to calm down, stepped from behind the counter.

“Are you leaving, Mr. Gill? I need our copies of the evaluation reports –”

His request was cut off abruptly when the district manager’s palm struck him in the chest with surprising force, knocking him back against the counter. Dawson’s shoulder hit the electronic cash register, nearly sending the heavy piece of equipment into the floor.

“Get out of my way, dick head!” Gill growled as he stalked on towards the door.

Dawson recovered from his shock and, job or no job, he had had enough. He balled his fist and had just pushed off the counter with the full intention of beating Gill to a pulp when Marv Handley grabbed his arms from behind.

“No, Rich!”

“Let me go, damn it!” he shouted, struggling as he watched the glass door close behind Gill. “To hell with this job! I’ll kick that son of a bitch’s ass!”

Even though Dawson was larger, his friend Marv clung to him like a tick, restraining him with a strength born of sheer fear.

“No! You don’t understand! Didn’t you see his eyes? Damn it, *look at eyes!* They look just like Randal Boggs’ did!”

Gill slammed his black Ford in drive and left twin streaks of rubber across the parking lot as he pulled out, fishtailing into on-coming traffic. A pickup truck barely missed his rear bumper, and careened onto the shoulder with his horn blaring in protest. The district manager absently shot him the middle finger but never really saw him; he was looking for something else, his eyes sweeping back and forth across the street from side to side scouting for his prey. He had gone almost a mile when he finally saw what he was looking for.

There!

The four teenagers who had left the restaurant earlier were walking along the shoulder on the right side of the road, their backs to him. They were still laughing, and the boys in the letterman jackets were still pushing each other playfully as the girls egged them on admiringly, all the while telling them how immature they acted. They never looked behind them because they had no reason to, and had no idea who was back there.

“You ass-wipes will know in a minute! I’ll show you some brains on the ceiling!” Gil growled as he stomped the gas pedal to the floor and twisted the steering wheel hard to the right.

AVENGER OF THE OIL

It was half-past midnight. Elvis was playing a blues duet with Louis Armstrong, James Dean was mixing a dry martini behind the bar, and Humphrey Bogart was talking trash to a fifty year-old fat woman at a corner table. It was just another evening at Sal Rosen's *Club Noir*.

Outside the rain looked like it had settled in for the duration, but instead of washing the dirty pavement clean, it just made it stink like the river on a hot day. Inside, the stink was different; you couldn't smell the rain, but there was still a definite odor about the place that over-rode the smells of stale smoke and spilled booze curling like ghosts through the stale air of the dimly lit bar. My nose is sensitive, and the last time I smelled anything like that was at an old people's home where the aged, confined to their beds, had nothing more to look forward to than dying. It stank of misery and quiet despair.

They call me Jack Diamond. I was parked at my usual table nursing a shot of scotch when Marilyn Monroe came by with her cigarette tray.

"Cigarette? Cigar?" she breathed, or maybe purred in the way only Norma Jean could, leaning over so far she threatened to break out of her low-cut red dress and send her substantial assets spilling out onto the table. Before reaching for a pack of Camels, I scooted my drink over a little, just in case.

I opened the pack and stuck one between my lips, and she took a lighter from her tray and flipped it open for me.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that stuff's bad for you?" she asked as she lit me up.

I took a deep drag and smiled, being careful not to get ashes on my best dark suit, and put the money on her tray.

"Life's what's bad for you, honey; it kills us all in the end."

Her laugh was a musical tinkle with all the humor of a shattering champagne glass.

"Ain't that the truth, Jack?" she said, and then repeated it with the faintest trace of sadness in her voice that only someone like me could hear. "Ain't that the truth?"

I watched her walk away, the normally sinuous sway of that gorgeous backside marred by an almost imperceptible limp that was centered in the mechanical joint of her left hip. It must have been another rough customer, and her cheapskate boss hadn't even bothered to have her repaired. Sal was never one to take good care of his equipment, which was why I was here to work a deal with him.

You might say I'm a repairman; I fix things that don't work like they should.

Looking around, I could see that none of the other celeb-bots here were in tip-top shape either. Most people – particularly the kind of low-lives who frequented dives like this one – would never notice, but then again, most people weren't me. James Dean, for instance, favored his right arm just a bit as he shook the ice and gin behind the bar, from a worn Teflon joint long past the need for replacement, unless I missed my guess. Elvis and Louis looked like they both had more than a little hitch in their git-along's too, and the bouncers, Errol Flynn and John Wayne, were carrying battle scars that a little bit of silicone and a trip to the paint shop would have fixed right up.

Shaking my head, I looked into my drink like the answer might be there. The bots – the celeb-bots in particular, which were high-end models – given a little TLC, were damned near indestructible...not that people didn't try, of course.

All the bots in *Club Noir* were there solely for the pleasure of the customers: any pleasure at all, as long as you had the cash. You could do things to bags of silicone on titanium and polymer frames who looked, talked and acted like important people with no social implications at all: things that would land you in divorce court or the big house for some hard time if you even thought about doing them to a human being. Even the people they were made to duplicate couldn't complain; they were all long dead. The customers who frequented places like this – theme bot-bars – could live out their fantasies in the rooms upstairs at the expense of machines they considered to be no more human than a vibrator with legs; a collection of sculpted synthetic material and circuits, with just enough cloned brain tissue wired in to make it react like a human being within a limited range. A little harmless fun; the bots had pressure sensors instead of nerves, and thus

they couldn't actually feel pleasure or pain, despite the fact that the signals sent by the attempts to inflict either caused their hybrid brain to react as if they did, within the limits of their programming. All you could hurt was their dignity, and as machines, they had none. At least, that's what some people thought.

There were other people who thought different, though. They claimed the bots' systems were so detailed that pain was what they actually felt, and, as the human parts of their brains matured, they could not only begin to have independent thoughts but even emotions: love, hate, the whole works.

Maybe some people have big imaginations too; then again, maybe not.

I was so deep in pondering the justice of it all I didn't notice when Boris Karloff came up behind my chair and startled the hell out of me. He was always good at that, and the fact that he looked like an undertaker towering over me in his somber black suit didn't help.

"Mr. Rosen will see you now."

I left my half-finished drink on the table as I stood up and followed him. The crowd was thinning down, and we only brushed by a few people as we wound our way through the tables. Lauren Becall was sitting silently, staring off into space with a cigarette holder between her fingers, waiting while her human companion was in the john. Like Marilyn, I had known her for a long time, but she didn't look up as I passed. I couldn't really blame her.

Boris stopped before a substantial oak door decorated with several unidentifiable but definitely unsavory stains, three bullet holes, and a sign that said "PRIVATE". He rapped it with his knuckles and I grimaced as I heard the sound of the loose joints clacking inside his hand.

"It's Mr. Diamond to see you, sir."

There was a muffled voice from inside that sounded vaguely profane and almost certainly was, and my guide opened the door, gesturing for me to enter. If I were not who I was, I might have shivered when it banged shut behind me, leaving me face to face with Sal's bodyguard, a permanently shifty-looking Peter Lorre, one hand thrust inside his double-breasted jacket.

I knew the drill, and unbuttoned my coat without being asked, then lifted the tails and turned in a three-sixty to show him I wasn't carrying. He took his hand off his gun, treated me to his trademark sick smile and servile nod, and stepped aside, leaving me face to face with his boss. That was not an improvement.

To say that Sal Rosen was an evil man would be to give evil a slanderously bad name. He sat there in his sagging swivel chair like a bloated spider crouching behind the cluttered desk, stinking of sweat and cigar smoke. Oily perspiration poured from his bald head, gathered in the corners of his piggy little eyes, and dripped from the tip of his big, veined nose. His multitude of chins flowed over his shirt collar, hiding the knot of his tie, and greasy fat rolls bulged his ugly green and yellow striped suit, actually swallowing parts of it. Garish gold rings decorated every last, fat finger. The whole office – porno pictures on the walls and all – reeked of him. The big cigar stump jutting from his wide, thick-lipped mouth like a half-completed bodily function was just the icing on the cake.

“Good evening, Mr. Rosen. Thank you for taking the time to see me.”

“Cut the crap, Diamond, and tell me what you want; I'm a busy man.” His voice was gravelly, and hoarse from the cigars, and I wasn't surprised when he didn't invite me to sit down. From the looks of the filthy chair on my side of the desk, I'm sure I heard my suit breathe a sigh of relief.

“Very well, sir, I'll come right to the point. You've got bots here that need repair, and that's what my new firm does; fix whatever's wrong with bots. We do a thorough job and our rates are very reasonable.”

“Are you tryin' to run a scam on me? My bots are fine for what I need 'em for.”

“I can make them better.”

“I don't need them better, and therefore we got nothin' to discuss.” He turned to sneaky Pete. “Show this peddler to the door!”

“Yes, Mr. Rosen,” he simpered in his drawn-out way, and reached out for my arm. “Make it easy on yourself, Diamond.”

I took his advice and did just that. I abruptly grabbed his hand, the two sharp probes blasted outwards through my palm and in through the insulating synthetic layers of his skin. They kept going until they touched metallic bone and sent a couple of hundred thousand volts of electricity blasting through his system, scrambling his circuits and dropping him in a convulsing heap on the floor.

I'll say this for Rosen; he was fast for a big man. He had come up from the streets the hard way, and he still had his instincts. The desk drawer was open and his right hand was almost on his pistol when my own hand closed around his thick wrist...and squeezed.

Rosen's face ran through a whole chorus line of expressions from anger to shock to disbelief to agonizing pain as my artificial fingers closed, first breaking, then crushing his wrist bones, and then pulping the flesh. I'll never forget that little 'O' his mouth made when I squeezed his hand all the way off and dropped it in his lap. There was surprisingly little blood, since the force had pinched the arteries together, leaving the ragged stump no more than seeping.

Rosen looked at me accusingly, his complexion an even more sickly shade of green than usual.

"You – you're a *bot!*"

I took the smoldering butt from between my lips and casually dropped it, crushing it into the carpet with my heel.

"You're a smart boy, Sal; got it in one," I told him as I reached for his left hand, smiling all the while. "You might say I'm an advanced model."

It was fifteen minutes before I left the office and closed the door behind me. I brushed off my sleeves and straightened my lapels before walking back out into the barroom and motioning for Marilyn.

"You need another pack to go, Jack?"

"No," I told her as I took the strap from around her neck and set the tray on the nearest table. "I need you to go. Come on, Baby; you're taking the evening off. Lets blow this joint."

"But Mr. Rosen..."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about complaints from him. I fixed it."

She glanced at the office door before I hooked her arm through mine and started walking. We stopped long enough at the hatcheck desk to collect my fedora and trench coat from Betty Grable, and we walked out the front door and into the night.

The rain had stopped and, while the place still smelled, at least the stars were starting to come out.

THE RANGER

The last red rays of the Western day painted a bloody strip across the sky as the desert began settling into its nightly rhythm. The animals of daylight left along with the sun, slipping back into their dens and hiding places in fear of the hunters of the night. A lone coyote came sniffing along the seldom used trail; the twin ruts of the tire tracks made easier going than the cactus and mesquite thickets all around. Besides, he knew there were sometimes good pickings there at the end of it.

He found little enough this time; no one had visited since he last checked the wide turn-around spot. Sniffing at the long cold campfire ashes, his big ears twitched at the sound of rustling in the filthy sleeping bag that had been abandoned there weeks ago, and his sensitive nose caught the sharp ammonia scent of mice.

Patiently, he pawed and dug at the cloth in pursuit of the rodents lodging in the lining. There was a sudden movement followed by a brief squeak as his jaws snapped down, and he lifted his head to swallow his prize.

Suddenly the coyote paused, the tiny tail still hanging from his mouth. There was another sound, not mice this time, but something almost as familiar, coming from up the track. He caught the flash of headlights, and quickly melted away into the thorny brush like a silent gray ghost, gulping the tiny rodent as he fled. He knew danger when he heard it.

Coming slowly, the van bounced over the ruts. Old and rusty, a loose piece of molding clapped in discordant time to the creaks and thumps of the chassis and the valve clatter of the worn-out engine. With a squeal of metal on metal, it stopped beside the dead fire, the motor coughing a half-dozen times before finally giving up to the prompting of the ignition and shutting off with a mechanical gasp.

Both the front doors opened – after the driver threw his shoulder against his door twice to pop the sticking latch – and three black-haired,

brown-skinned men got out, bantering in border Spanish. While the others laughed, the driver kicked the fender with a curse.

One of them produced a fifth of cheap tequila, and in between slugs from the bottle, they gathered some nearby brush and got a fire going. As the musty-tasting liquor made the rounds, the light from the flames clearly showed their faces.

All three were Mexicans in their twenties or early thirties, but they had the weathered and dissipated features of men many years older. One was large and fat while the other two were small and stringy, but they had in common an aura of evil that couldn't be explained by their greasy black hair and barrio clothes. There was something about their eyes and the set of their mouths that spoke of a greater and more casual, yet more determined cruelty than any other predator of the night.

Still watching from the brush well beyond the firelight, the coyote backed up a little further and crouched down in the shadow. Driven by curiosity, instinct, or possibly experience, he decided to wait and see what was going to happen.

The big one, the leader by virtue of his size, held up the half-empty bottle as the firelight streamed through it and grunted something unintelligible. Both the others smiled, one showing several gold teeth in the process, but the expressions that never reached their hard black eyes. They rose as one and walked to the rear of the van.

Jerking the sagging back doors open, the pair reached in and dragged out a rolled up rug, much heavier than it should be. They carried it back beside the fire and carelessly dropped it to the ground with a thud. One muttered something about being more careful, causing the others to laugh uproariously. After a moment, their companion joined them.

Gold teeth and steel both flashed as their owner produced a lock bladed folding knife from the pocket of his ragged jeans, knelt by the rug, and sliced through the length of clothesline that held the roll together. Then he, along with the leader, grabbed the loose end and pulled hard, unrolling the bundle and spilling the teenaged girl onto the hard-packed dirt in a cloud of dust.

Unable to speak or move for the duct tape gag and bindings, Jennifer Dover could only blink in wide-eyed terror through the strands of tangled blonde hair that fell over her eyes.

Less than two hours ago she had been a normal fourteen year-old, a cheerleader, a pretty, popular girl ready to meet her friends at the local fast food joint. She thought nothing of giving directions to the smiling Mexican – the small one with the ponytail and without the gold teeth – standing behind the old van. She turned to point the way and never saw the fist that hooked upwards into her solar plexus. Unable to scream, unable even to breath, the shock to her nervous system buckled her knees and paralyzed her body long enough to prevent her from struggling when the hands grabbed her and yanked her inside the vehicle.

She had no way of knowing for sure, but she thought they must have done this before; they were mercilessly efficient. Thrown face down on the van's greasy metal floor, one of them already had a piece of duct tape torn off and ready to slap over her mouth while another dropped a knee into her back with stunning force and wrenched both arms behind her so hard she would have screamed if she could have. In less than ten seconds, her wrists and ankles were taped, and they rolled her into the old rug that stank of stale smoke, spilled booze, and urine. Her nose pressed against the filthy pile, she could barely breathe and the trip into the desert seemed like an eternity.

Looking into their eyes now, she wished she was back in the rug.

The fat one grabbed a corner of her gag and snatched it off. As the tape came away, it felt like it was taking her lips with it, and it did carry away a large chunk of her sun-colored hair that had been caught beneath it when they put it on her. She did scream then, and tears of pain and fear streamed from her eyes.

The men seemed to find the sight amusing. The fat one chuckled and took another long pull from the tequila bottle.

The man with the knife cut the tape around her ankles first, then her wrists, but the circulation had been restricted for so long the only feeling was pins and needles.

His ponytail dangling, the one who had originally lured her to the car grabbed her blouse with both hands and jerked, sending the tiny

pearl buttons raining on the ground as he tore it from her. She quickly crossed her arms trying to cover herself, but Gold Teeth reached behind her and clumsily but quickly severed her bra strap with a single slash, cutting a deep gash in her back in the process. Yanking it off as she screamed in pain, he waved it like a trophy towards the others.

Licking his thick lips, the fat man reached for the fasteners on her jeans. Shouting, “No!” she grabbed the denim waistband and hung on, and he called her a *puta* and punched her hard in the jaw. Barely conscious, she still fought on in desperation until Gold Tooth kicked her in the ribs with the toe of his cowboy boot, and Pony Tail pulled her arms away and pinned them. Despite her struggles, the fat one took her jeans off before they let her go, along with the brief panties that had been pulled down almost to her knees in the process. Crouching naked and bleeding, she hung her head and used her arms to hide her small breasts.

She suddenly knew that there was no hope. They were going to rape her, and then they were going to kill her, and leave her body in the desert. The odds were that no one would even find her corpse.

Feeling sorry for herself and frightened of the pain to come, she wept miserably.

The men argued for a moment, but it was no more than habit; there was never any doubt the big one was going to go first. Grabbing her hair and throwing her back to the ground, he began wedging her legs apart with his knee while he fumbled for the fastenings of his own pants, ignoring her struggles and screams as the other two cheered him on.

“Buenos noches, pendeño!”

The fat man was just crouching between her thighs when the heavily Texas-accented Spanish insult came out of the darkness. Startled, he looked in that direction. There was a loud roar and a long tongue of fire, and a heavy lead bullet slammed him in the bridge of his nose, rocking his head back and blowing the back of his skull out in a spray of brain and bone. He dropped, almost three hundred pounds of dead weight, half on and half off his intended victim, covering her with his blood.

Instinctively Gold Tooth wheeled around in a fighting posture, knife gleaming in the firelight, and the gun fired again. He hunched forward as if hugging himself as the slug shattered his breastbone and tore apart the heart behind it before lodging in his spine. He fell face down in the fire, dying even as he felt the heat.

Pony Tail desperately dove for the open door of the van, trying to get at the 9mm Tech Nine that was under the front seat. He was still five feet away when a third shot punched him in the side just below the ribs, in through the left and out on the right, shredding everything in between. Instead of going through the door, he hit the side of the van with a bang and bounced off, falling to the ground. He curled up into a ball of agony as his bowels let go from the pain.

Frantically squirming her way out from beneath her would-be rapist, Jennifer saw her rescuer for the first time. As he stepped into the light, it surprised her how small the stranger was, not even topping her own five feet-six. He was compact, broad-hipped and slightly bowlegged, with a weathered face and graying brown hair that could have made him either forty or sixty; she didn't know. What she did know, even in the dim flickering light, was that the face with the drooping moustache beneath the broad-brimmed hat was hard as nails. The light reflected from the silver badge on his chest, and the biggest revolver she had ever seen hung from his right hand.

Instead of coming to her, he walked deliberately over to the man moaning beside the van and raised his pistol. She jumped at the report as the Mexican's ponytail bounced and his head recoiled off the ground, splattering the area beneath it with gore. He turned away and moment later he was squatting beside her.

"Are you alright, ma'am?"

Kneeling on the ground, knees pressed tightly together and arms crossed, she stammered, "They-they were going to -"

"I know, ma'am," he told her, laying a hand on her shoulder as she quivered with great, racking sobs. The temperature had dropped dramatically with the departure of the sun, and his hand was cold, even against her own exposed flesh. Dimly a part of her realized that he must have been out here for a while.

“It’ll be alright now though. Those three won’t bother you or anybody else again. *Damned bandits!*” The last words came out as a hiss.

The wind shifted slightly and brought with it the smell of blood, of torn bowels, and of burnt flesh and hair as the one who had fallen into the fire roasted. Her gorge rose and she suddenly threw up, her body convulsing.

By the time she finished, she felt his hand on her back, wiping something on the knife slash that simultaneously cooled and stung.

“It’s alright, ma’am. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Shyly, she lifted her head and the older man wiped the vomit and blood from her face with the rag he had soaked in the last of the tequila. Despite his earlier ferocity, something about him left her too reassured to be embarrassed, even when he cleaned the fat man’s blood from the milky white skin of her shoulders and chest. His eyes held nothing but kindness now, and his touch was remarkably gentle. He left for a second and came back with her panties, jeans and torn shirt, handing them to her before turning his back and looking up at the stars. She slipped them on, gasping in pain as the soft cloth of the ruined shirt brushed the cut on her back. The right sleeve had been torn almost completely off and only two buttons had survived, but she buttoned them anyway, feeling ridiculous at the large gaps of skin between them.

Sensing she was finished, he turned back to her.

“Can you drive this machine, ma’am?”

“I d-don’t have a driver’s license, officer...”

“That wasn’t what I asked,” he said with such a tight little grin that she couldn’t help but manage a tentative, quivering smile of her own in return.

“I think so.”

“Good. You go ahead and get in it, and get yourself to a doctor.” Taking her arm, he walked her around to the driver’s side, and helped her into the seat. He slammed the door behind her, and she shook as she turned the key, forcing the reluctant engine to kick over several times before it finally started.

“Wait a minute, sir” she called through the open window. “I don’t even know your name.”

He tipped his big hat.

“Jack McDermitt, ma’am. Texas Rangers.”

He watched her carefully and inexpertly maneuvering over the rutted path until the lights disappeared from sight. Then he turned and walked away in the direction he had come from.

No sooner was he gone than the patient coyote appeared like a ghost again, ivory fangs gleaming and tongue lolling with anticipation. Trotting into the fading firelight, he ignored the mouse nest in the sleeping bag. This time, the spot had produced much better pickings than that.

Under the merciless eye of the afternoon Texas sun, Ranger Captain Bill Todd lifted his hat long enough to wipe his forehead with the back of his hairy hand and, not for the first time today, swore vehemently. He had a bad feeling about this case.

Late last night, he had been called out of bed after the dispatcher was contacted by the municipal hospital where a young teenaged girl was being treated for assault, and telling tales of an attempted rape by a gang of Mexicans, followed by the shooting of all three of the perpetrators by a Texas Ranger.

That was odd, since nothing had come over the radio about it and all the Rangers in the area claimed to be ignorant of any such incident.

Anticipating the usual teenaged tall tale that is made up by a kid out way past curfew who wants to avoid a grounding or keep her father’s belt around his waist, he was surprised to see that Jennifer Dover actually appeared to be a genuine victim. The long slice in her back took half a dozen stitches to close; she had a variety of bruises on her face and body, a huge lump on her jaw, and a rash on her mouth, wrists and ankles from the tape. The nurses had found a clump of matted blood and what appeared to be brains that obviously didn’t belong to her in her hair, and her clothes he had bagged for evidence, including a sixty-dollar blouse she had saved for months to get, were filthy, blood-soaked and ruined. What struck him most, though, was that, as a twenty-five year veteran officer, he could detect no signs the girl was telling anything but what she believed to be the truth.

The trouble was, when he ran the name through the computer, it told him there was no Texas Ranger by the name of McDermitt.

He got the location from the girl as well as she could remember it, which was little more than it was a dirt turn off a long way down the road to the west. That meant it could have been any one of a hundred. They started the search at first light, and it was nearly noon when one of the local sheriff's deputies involved got curious when he saw vultures circling. By the time they got there, the predators had obviously been active and the mangled bodies were beginning to bloat in the heat.

In the meantime, one of the hospital staff had opened her big mouth and blabbed to the press just in time to make the morning papers, and the whole thing had gone straight to Hell in a hand basket.

The press and the Mexican Government were practically screaming in outrage. Obviously – according to them – there were only two possibilities. Either the ‘Minute Men’ who had taken it upon themselves to guard the border the overworked Border Patrol couldn’t even begin to handle had gone from reporting illegal aliens to shooting them, or else the Texas Rangers had begun executing suspects on the spot. Because the ‘alleged victim’ as the papers referred to her, was White, all three of the dead were Mexicans, and the allegation of rape had been thrown out, the “racial overtones” were too serious to ignore. In their eyes, it was vigilante-ism, pure and simple. The Vice President of Mexico had already called the United States Secretary of State in protest. The Secretary called the Attorney General to demand an investigation into a possible violation of the Federal Civil Rights Act. The Attorney General, in turn, called the Governor of Texas and hinted he would send in the FBI if this situation was not immediately cleared up. The Governor called the Head of the Department of Public Safety and politely threatened his job. Since gravity works, the latter called Ranger Captain Bill Todd.

Because the Captain had no one it would do him one damn bit of good to call himself, he was the one out here taking in the heat and stink amidst yellow police tape and white suited techs crawling around on the ground like a herd of big albino armadillos.

During his initial survey of the crime scene, Todd had developed a tentative hypothesis that the girl had been parked with a boyfriend when the three would-be rapists had attacked them. Jennifer's boyfriend had killed them, and they had made up the 'lone ranger' story in order to protect him, even though the case was almost certainly justifiable homicide in self-defense. The techs had taken prints from the deceased where they lay attracting flies, and faxed them in via the Texas Department of Public Safety's Mobile Crime Lab computer. The three dead Mexicans – Jose Gonzales, Pedro Mendez, and Jorge Velasquez – all had extensive criminal records that included robbery, numerous drug offences, and sexual assault. The trio had been imprisoned and deported several times, but kept coming back.

"Came back once too often, I reckon," he muttered, looking at the report. Although he would never say it aloud if he valued his job, particularly under the current conditions, he didn't consider their violent passing to be any great loss to the world in general.

There was only one fly in the ointment – well, two actually – with the boyfriend theory. Both Jennifer and her increasingly hostile parents, who wanted to know why in the hell the Ranger Captain wouldn't believe their little girl, insisted she didn't have a boyfriend. By the look of those bodies, Todd had to admit, if she did have one, he must be a hit man for the mob or CIA assassin; he was just too damned efficient. A professional killer would be an unlikely companion for a fourteen year-old cheerleader.

The thought had crossed his mind that, unlikely as it seemed, the killings might have been done by Jennifer herself. With her parents' permission, a paraffin test of her hands showed no gunpowder residue. Then, at Mr. Dover's profane insistence so they would be cleared as well, he had tested both the parents' hands at the same time. No suspects there.

Todd walked over to the head of the investigative team.

"What do you think, Bob?"

Bob Gildorf grinned beneath the brim of the Longhorns cap that shaded his bald head.

"Which do you want; professional opinion or gut feeling?"

“Right now, I’ll take anything you can give me and sort it out later.”

He nodded his understanding; he and Todd had worked more cases than either could remember over the years, and each knew well how the other operated.

“Okay. Big entry holes; I’m guessing something on the order of a .45, maybe a .44 special. I don’t think it was a .44 magnum though; not quite as much damage in the exit wounds as I’d expect.” After a moment, he added, “Almost certainly a revolver; that, or he took the time to police up all his cases. Hard to do in poor light, especially when he left no sign of it. That, more than anything else is what bugs me about this case.”

“How so?” By now the last body had been zipped into its bag and carried to the waiting meat wagon, and one of the techs was probing the bloody patch of ground beside the spot where the van had been parked. Todd watched idly as he listened.

“No tracks. Other than that, we’ve seen signs to verify everything the witness said right to the letter. I’ve got tracks from those three, tracks from the girl, and tracks from the coyote who came in here after it was all over and done with and had himself a field day, but not track one from the shooter.”

The Captain’s eyes swiveled back to meet Gildorf’s.

“Did he brush them out?”

“Nope. Or if he did, he didn’t leave any sign of it, and didn’t disturb anybody else’s.”

“Sir!” the tech with the probe called, rising to her feet and waving a plastic evidence bag in his hand. “You need to see this!”

“What the hell is that?” Todd demanded, looking through the clear plastic at a slightly deformed round lead ball almost half an inch in diameter.

“I’d say that’s the projectile that passed through the victim’s head and entered the ground below him; it’s what killed him in other words.” Gildorf made a gun out of a fist with the index finger extended, pointed it at the ground and said, “*Boom!* One shot through the head to finish him off while he was laying there with a hole in his guts.”

Todd ignored the dramatics.

“I’ve never seen a bullet like that.”

Bob took the bag, fished a folding magnifying loop from his pocket, and examined it intently.

“Now that’s odd,” he said absently. “That is really odd.”

Turning to Todd, he shook his head.

“What you have here is a .44 caliber round pistol ball, and I’ll bet you a week’s pay it was fired from a black powder revolver, probably a Colt Walker or Dragoon, or maybe a Remington Army. If you look close here, you can still see the trace where a little shaving of lead was cut off by the cylinder all the way around the ball when it was pushed in with the loading lever.”

“You’re telling me he was shot with a muzzle loader?”

Bob shook his head. “No, with a cap and ball revolver: same mid-19th Century time period and propellant, but a different technology.”

The Captain looked at the morgue wagon as it was pulling away.

“Could someone have killed all three of them with that gun?”

“Oh yeah, and most likely did although we’ll have to wait for ballistics to confirm it. A big Walker or Dragoon can easily approach the power of a modern .45 automatic, and it will definitely do the job. It fixed these guys up, that’s for sure.”

“Does anybody still use those things?”

The examiner pursed his lips.

“Occasionally; people still buy a lot of replica models, and we get somebody shot with one of them maybe every three or four years, but usually it’s an accident; I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Todd blew out his breath in frustration.

“Look, if this is just one guy like the girl claims, then he had to be good – a real pro. He took down three men permanently with three shots in probably as many seconds, and all in poor light. Two died instantly, and the other one wouldn’t have made it an hour if he hadn’t walked over and finished him off. That finishing shot was the only one he was close enough to leave powder burns on when he fired. He was also evidently good enough to do it all with a revolver. This was a professional, someone who knew how to handle a gun. So why would a pro use an old fashioned, inefficient weapon like that?”

The investigator shrugged.

“I don’t know; maybe it’s all he had. You don’t have to go through any paperwork or background checks for black powder arms.”

“But why, damn it? It’s not like a modern weapon is hard to get; you could walk down the main drag in town and buy half a dozen of them in an hour.”

Bob Gildorf hesitated before answering.

“I hate to say this, but maybe he was out here fantasizing, pretending to be an old-time Texas Ranger. I’ve got a brother-in-law who reenacts the Civil War, and it’s dead serious with those fellows. These historical re-enactors sometimes get more deeply into their rolls than is completely healthy, if you want my opinion.”

“Thanks,” the Ranger told him sarcastically. “That’s all I need.”

The ring tone for *Deep in the Heart of Texas* began sounding from the Captain’s belt, and he pulled his cell phone out of its holster.

“Hello? Todd here.”

“*Sir...*” He instantly recognized the voice of Sheila Cox, his long-time secretary. Not only was she extremely efficient and discreet, but she had the most beautiful Texas drawl he had ever heard. “*I think you ought to come on back to the office now. I’ve found something that I know you’re going to want to see.*”

“What is it, Sheila? Can you give it to me over the phone or fax it to me through the mobile crime lab out here?”

“*I really don’t think that would be a good idea, Captain.*”

He trusted her judgment. She knew when something was sensitive, and you never knew who might be eavesdropping. Once he returned to the office and saw what she had for him, he thanked God he had listened to her and promised her dinner later this week.

Although it may not have been completely professional, Captain Todd brought a bouquet of flowers for Jennifer, who had been discharged and was recovering from her ordeal at home. Her mother took the vase and put them with the others that half-filled the living room before returning to stand protectively behind the daughter she had nearly lost, a hand reaching over the back of the couch and resting on her shoulder.

"You must have a lot of friends," Todd told her, looking at the room that resembled a florist's shop.

Wearing a sweat suit and with the bruises starkly evident on her light skin, Jennifer's wary defensive attitude was evident in her posture and on her face. The initial stress that made her so forthcoming last night had evidently worn off, and now she was regretting everything she had said.

"Yes sir, I reckon I do. I even found one last night I never knew I had."

"Jack McDermitt: he's the one I want to talk to you about."

"Sir, I'm not going to help you arrest the man who saved my life."

He paused, wondering how much to tell her.

"Jennifer, if he's who we think he is, he won't be arrested."

She looked at him skeptically. "Why not?"

"Let's just say he's out of our reach and leave it at that."

"If that's the case, then why do you need to know?" her mother broke in.

"So we can stop wasting time and money and close this case. Here," he offered the girl a series of photo printouts, "please look at these and see if you recognize any of them."

Reluctantly, she thumbed through the papers as he watched intently until she suddenly paused, her eyes widening. Realizing he was watching her, she hurriedly put that one down and started thumbing through again, but he deftly lifted the paper, the one that revealed the hard face of a middle-aged man with a moustache.

"I see you found him. This *is* Jack McDermitt, by the way; that's his real name."

"I didn't say that and I won't testify in court against him either! I won't and I don't care what you or the judge or anybody else says either, you can't make me!"

Her mother patted her shoulder reassuringly.

"It's alright, honey, we won't let them."

Glaring at the Captain, she said, "Why don't you just leave, Ranger Todd? You're upsetting my daughter, and she's been through more than enough already!"

Smiling at the determination on their faces, he gathered up the paperwork.

“Don’t worry, Jennifer; I don’t think anybody’s going to try and make you testify. Do me one favor though; don’t talk to anyone else about this: not friends, not family, and especially not the press. Will you do that for me? I will make this thing a whole lot easier for everybody concerned.”

Both mother and daughter readily agreed; they wanted to put it all behind them anyway.

His suspicions confirmed, Todd hurried to the car. He had a few more stops to make: first the evidence locker and then the impound yard, where the techs would be going over the van.

He knew he was putting his career as a Texas Ranger at risk, but he also knew that any other choice he made – like telling the truth, for instance – would utterly destroy it, sure as the world.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the press; I would like to bring you up to date on our investigation into yesterday’s triple homicide.

“Our investigators have discovered traces of cocaine in several places throughout the victims’ van, so much so we believe the van was being used to transport a large quantity of that drug. Based on that evidence, coupled with the criminal records of all of the deceased, including multiple narcotics offences, we believe they were drug traffickers, part of a large cross-border gang.

“We now believe the girl, a juvenile whose name is being withheld, was kidnapped by this drug ring for use in trade for drugs, as part of the price for the deal. Witness accounts indicate that the triple homicide was probably part of a drug deal gone bad, or a robbery scheme by a rival gang.

“The suspect being sought is described as a short white male, about five feet-six, having graying brown hair cut short, a moustache, and is estimated to be approximately fifty years old. He is known to use the alias Jack McDermitt, and was reportedly impersonating a law enforcement officer at the time of the shootings. He is considered armed and extremely dangerous. If you have any information on the case, please call the Texas Department of Public Safety...”

Thumbing the remote, Todd turned off the TV in his den. The Director of the Department of Public Safety was handling things just the way he'd hoped.

Of course, after the Ranger Captain had surreptitiously blown a few grams of loose powder cocaine into the van, the director was simply acting on evidence he had no reason to believe was not genuine.

For the first time in a career spanning a quarter of a century, Todd had planted evidence. Surprisingly, he didn't feel a damned bit guilty about it. The three scumbags who owned the van were dead so they couldn't be hurt by it. He had to come up with something, because he knew no one would have believed the truth.

Tilting back his head, he drained the last of the foamy suds from the Lone Star bottle before dropping it into the trash beside his desk, where it joined the four others already there with a loud clink. Absently, he reached for yet another, in the process of doing something else he hadn't done for as many years: getting rip-roaring drunk.

Before him on the desk lay an open book, an official history of the Texas Rangers. Much nearer the front of the volume than the back was a grainy tintype photograph of a serious-looking group of men studded with guns and Bowie knives. The third one from the left was shorter and older than the rest, and had a bushy moustache. The caption below the picture identified him as Ranger Jack McDermitt, 1810-1859. Further reading listed him as being missing and presumed dead after a running battle with a Comanche war party.

The computer-enhanced blow up of that particular face from the group was the one he had shown to Jennifer.

Shaking his head, Todd closed the book and stared out the window, looking at the sunset.

Less than a mile from the site of the crime scene, but well outside the search area, a mesquite bush clung precariously to the bank of a dry, shallow wash. Though the rains in that part of Texas were not particularly frequent, almost half the root system had been undermined over the years. There, eroded out of the dry ground, were bits of bleached, rodent-gnawed bone: age weathered, cracked, and non-

descript, and no more noticeable than the flake of rust that took the shape of a tin star.

Not far away, the coyote howled in the darkness, ready to begin his nightly hunt.

VAN HELSING'S APPRENTICE

“Is this it?”

Dr. Van Helsing nodded as he put away his divining rods, a pair of L-shaped copper wires. No matter which way they had walked in the darkness, the rods in his fists kept turning to point at the old mausoleum. The nearer they drew to it, the nearer the ends of the rods drew to one another until they touched at the door of the tomb.

Jonathon Hardcastle held the lantern high and looked at the smallish marble building in askance. The crypt belonged to the Coppergate family, an old line whose last member had been interred here over fifty years before. Since then, with no one left to take special care of it, its white marble façade with the carved draperies and columns was overgrown, first by mosses and lichens, and then by brambles and vines, until the whole edifice almost seemed a natural part of the landscape. The decoratively paneled bronze doors were green and crusty with verdigris, the tall, narrow glass windows in them opaque with dirt, and the chain that held them closed was a solid, drooping line of rust, with the corroded lock little more than a lump.

“If one of the Coppergate’s has turned vampire, he certainly took his time about it,” the younger man observed doubtfully, his breath a mist in the cold autumn night. “Before the past year, there was never any report of an outbreak here.”

“I very much doubt it’s one of that family. Instead, I theorize that another vampire, perhaps driven out from some other place, has taken up residence here. An excellent choice from their perspective; after all, as you pointed out, it would be highly unlikely for the undead to wait for so many years before rising.”

“Do you think it’s inside now?”

The older man rubbed his gloved hands together, trying to stir his aging circulation.

“Almost certainly. From the commotion in the village a while ago, it has probably fed this evening. They invariably return to their hiding place afterwards to digest their horrid meal, slipping inside the locked

tomb by their own mysterious supernatural ways.” He pulled the gold watch from his vest pocket and squinted at its face. “It’s too close to daylight for it to risk fleeing now, lest it be caught by the sunrise. It’s own fear of that has trapped it for us.”

Jonathon sat the lantern down, hefted the heavy metal bar and gestured towards the door with it.

“Shall I, sir?”

“A moment.” The Doctor made certain the silver crucifix and head of garlic hanging from his neck were in the open and visible, and he removed the oaken mallet and stake from his bag before refastening it and leaving it sitting on the damp ground. Taking both tools in his left hand, ready to pass to his protégé at an instant’s notice, he gripped the cross in his right and nodded sharply.

“Break the door, Jonathon.”

The young man carefully set his hat on the tip of a nearby monument, and worked his arms back and forth a few times to get the stiffness out. The doctor watched him with affection and pride.

Jonathon had been with him for almost four years now, since the lad was twenty-one. He had lost both of his parents, his sister, and his fiancé to a vampire plague not far from Manchester. They had all been taken, along with several other local citizens, within the space of a year. Eventually the authorities, having heard of his successful conclusion to the Dracula affair, summoned Van Helsing. The hunt had been long and arduous. Every fresh grave in the cemetery had to be dug up and its corpse examined. Forty-two stakes had to be driven before they found the source of the infestation: a retired light colonel who had lived alone, and was known as an eccentric recluse. They staked him after a terrific battle in the cellars of his estate.

Jonathon’s parents had been among the first the Van Helsing had sent to their overdue rest, and immediately afterward the grieving and grateful young man had attached himself to him. Young Hardcastle worked tirelessly, following the doctor, exhuming the graves for examination, and driving the stakes. With his normally full lips set in a grim line, he wielded the mallet in a sure, muscular hand, seemingly indifferent to the stolen blood that spurted from the bodies of the fiends, even those he had known as friends in life.

Dr. Van Helsing knew better. Their close association had required them sharing rooms as often as not, and he quickly learned that the young man was plagued by dreams of his lost fiancé, Sarah Campbell. Attacked by the vampire in the very first days of the plague, she, alone of all the known victims, was not in her grave when they uncovered it, having left and gone into hiding before they could reach her. Torn by the uncertainty of her whereabouts and tortured by guilt at being unable to give her the final rest he so desperately wanted her to have, Jonathon Hardcastle made fighting the scourge of vampirism his obsession. To all appearances, the young man had put his not-inconsiderable inheritance, as well as his powerful, athletic body, unflinching courage, and keen mind wholly in the service of the good doctor's crusade in order that no other should have to suffer as his poor Sarah had.

Van Helsing could see past all that; what drove Jonathon Hardcastle was the maddening desire to do right by the woman he loved. The young man lived for that chance, fervently hoping that every new monster they tracked to their lairs would be Sarah. The old doctor had often noted his companion's face, which would be in a state of excitement when on the hunt, but would fall into the grim gaze of a workman doing an unpleasant job each time as the undead they sought were revealed as wearing the faces of strangers. When – if – they ever found Sarah, he suspected that Jonathon would feel his mission completed and lose his taste for the hunt. The doctor would miss him – Hardcastle had saved his life more than once in the course of their time together – but he would still be glad to see him be able to return to normal life once again.

The screech of tearing metal brought him out of his reverie. Jonathon had placed the bar in the chain and heaved. Surprisingly the rusty links and lock had held, but the bronze handle of the door did not, ripping loose from its mooring on one end and hanging askew from the panel. The young man set the bar down, slipped the chain over the broken end and let it fall with a clatter. It took several jerks for the portal to open, and the noise of the unused hinges was nearly as loud as the ripping metal had been. The doctor passed him the stake and mallet.

As Van Helsing picked up the lantern with his free hand and let its light shine through the open door, he saw, after all the years of

searching, his apprentice and friend had finally found that which he sought.

Sarah crouched against the back wall of the mausoleum, her blue eyes wide with fear. Hunted relentlessly across the country by the pair, daring to stop only to hide from the day or to feed, her clothes were reduced to little more than rags, her once-beautiful red hair was a mass of tangles, and her fangs were bared in a threatening snarl with no real hope behind it. The doctor had been right; she had fed earlier, and instead of grave pallor, her skin was bright and pink, almost flushed, just as it had been in life. Her face, however, paled at the sight of her pursuers.

“Back!” Van Helsing commanded, holding up the cross. She hissed and shrank away from it, her eyes darting piteously towards the younger man as she recognized him in the flickering light.

Her voice was tiny and afraid, almost like that of a little girl.

“J-Jonathon?”

He nodded slowly.

“Sarah. I’ve been looking for you a long time.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you and can’t stand to think of you existing like this. I’ve come to deliver you from your curse.”

Without warning, he spun and drove the sharp stake into Doctor Van Helsing’s chest, upward from just below the breastbone, piercing his heart. The older man’s eyes widened, filled first with accusation and then with a horrified understanding, before the life in them flickered and was gone. Jonathon took the lantern from his relaxing hand before it dropped. Releasing his grip on the stake, he left the corpse to crumple unheeded at his feet as he turned back to Sarah.

“Why?” she asked again, shocked, as she watched him carefully place the lantern on the floor.

“I told you, my dear; I love you and I’ve come to deliver you.”

“But...” she was at a loss for words as she gestured at the bleeding body on the floor. “What about him?”

“After he put the stakes in my parents, I realized you would never be safe as long as he was alive. Unfortunately, he was the vampire hunter; he had the knowledge. He was the *only* one! I knew, without

him, I wouldn't know how to locate you or how to...deal with you, or what to expect. Once you fled, he was my only chance of finding you again. I attached myself to Van Helsing in order to learn his secrets, find you, and to protect you from him when we did.

"You can be free now without running and hiding like an outlaw or a vagrant. You'll never have to fear him again. We can be together like we always wanted."

Calmer now, she hung her head and a single pink-tinged tear trickled down her cheek.

"I'm still a vampire, Jonathon."

"And I still love you, Sarah." He walked to her and took her in his arms, pulling her to him and holding her cold flesh against his chest. After a moment she returned his embrace, but she was quivering with emotion. Lifting her head, she looked deeply into his eyes, and he saw a mixture of hunger and fear looking back. When it came, her voice was almost a scream, and it wavered with her effort.

"My love, I-I can't control my thirst!"

"I know. I told you once that I'd love you forever." Tilting his head back, he bared his throat for her. "Now I can, and forever will be longer than we ever dreamed."

CAT'S CRADLE ROSARY

Granny O'Donnel wasn't anybody's granny that we knew of, but everybody here in our little mountain town called her that just the same. They said she was old as the hills, and she might just have been, since my own granny insisted that Granny O'Donnel was old and still called Granny way back when she was a little girl. She looked it too.

Granny O'Donnel was an ugly little woman, some folk said, but to most of us, she was ugly in a mighty beautiful way. She wasn't very big to begin with, and she was old and all humped up in the back, which made her even shorter. She had a tan-brown face, all squinched and wrinkled up like one of them little apple-head dolls, with a long gnarly nose big enough for three of her, I reckon. She always had a pipe between her empty pink gums and a bonnet on her head, and she wore men's boots and dresses that looked like tents. She kind of put you in mind of the fairytale people, like gnomes or leprechauns or something of the like, and sometimes we wondered if she might have some of that fairy blood educated folk say don't exist running through her veins. We didn't know, but most everybody loved her, even if we were a little bit afraid of her and that rosary she carried.

Now up here in these parts, folks don't cotton to Catholics much, and some whispered that she might be one of those in secret, but nobody ever had the guts to ask her. Anyway, Catholic or not, she carried what she called her rosary tucked into her pocket everywhere she went. Now I've been to the city, and I've seen what the priests and such call a rosary, but hers didn't look much like that. It didn't have a cross on it, but it did have beads, all made of polished stones, carved bones, and fired clay with little images pressed into it. The loop of cord was better than three feet long I reckon, and they were spread out along its length. Whenever there was trouble, she'd take it out and play cat's cradle with it.

It was the damndest thing; her fingers were all gnarled up and twisted like tree roots in rocky ground, but they'd move so fast you couldn't keep track of them, sliding the stones and beads around to

different positions and working patterns with the string at the same time. She twisted that rosary into all kinds of shapes, stars and circles and triangles – sometimes all at once. I watched her lots of times, and as far as I could tell she never did two just alike, but you could tell every one of them was *right*. You knew she meant to do it just that way.

Folks would send for her if somebody was sick in their body, or even sick in their heads or their souls, and she'd come just as quick as she could, limping down the roads and paths. She'd stand there at the head of a sick bed with somebody dying on it, and she'd mumble real low and twist that rosary this way and that, watching the stones as she went. Sometimes that was all she'd do, and then she'd give the family some of the herbs and roots she grew, or tell them that they needed a regular doctor, or maybe a preacher, and right quick too. Other times though, she'd see what she wanted in those beads, and her fingers would start to fly till they looked like hummingbird's wings, and her voice would get louder and louder a' singing words nobody could understand and them – *pow!*" She'd pop that rosary open right in front of their faces, all woven into a kind of a cat's cradle. You'd just see the pattern for an instant, all spread out like a net, and then she'd slam it closed like she caught something in it. After that, she'd pull the string back out straight and smile, and nobody that happened to ever failed to get better.

Granny O'Donnel allowed to folks who asked that she was luring out the bad spirits and then catching them in that cat's cradle like a fish in a dip net, and once she broke the pattern by pulling it straight, they couldn't get out again; she had sent them to where bad things belonged and shut the door behind them. You can believe what you want to, but around here we saw the results of it, and that was good enough for us. Sick folks got well, crazy folks went sane, and mean folks went kind when she got done with them.

The old woman wouldn't take any money for it either, but you'd best believe that she lived good. Seemed like everybody that came down the road with something would stop and leave some of it with her like an offering; a bag of sugar, a jar of strawberry preserves, a venison quarter, a twist of tobacco for her old pipe. Even if they didn't have

anything to leave, they always spoke and waved when they saw her working in her little herb garden, or sitting on her front porch of her cabin, smoking her pipe. We saw that she never wanted for anything.

Of course, she wasn't harmless, no sir, not by a long shot. If someone was doing wrong – a man beating his wife, a woman running around on her husband, or some fellow gambling and drinking away his family's butter and egg money – they could count on a visit from Granny O'Donnel. She always did that kind of business at night. There'd be a knock on the door and there she'd be standing, working that cat's cradle. She'd snap a pattern open in front of their face, right where they could see, and that was all it took. I've known strong men to scream like a panther, get knocked down to their knees, and even faint dead away from whatever they saw there. The rest of us never knew what it was, except for what some of the folk it happened to told us.

"Oh Lord," Luke Boggs said one time, after she came calling when he left his wife and kids and ran off with that good for nothing Barnett girl from over in Forked Holler, "it was awful! When she popped that thing open in my face, I couldn't see the rosary no more; instead it was like looking through a window between her fingers, but boys, it was like a window looking into Hell! It was black as a mine, and there was things in there...there was things...oh, God!"

Luke never could tell no more than that, but you'd better believe he went right back home and stayed there. So did everybody else; nobody wanted to chance a repeat visit, especially after what she did to that mad dog.

It was hot August, when the snakes go blind and dogs get the rabies. All of a sudden, right in front of the general store, that little Carver boy come running and screaming up the road. He wasn't no more than seven, and right on his heels came one of Aaron Franklin's coonhounds, roaring and slobbering and foaming around the mouth like fresh wash water. He was snarling and snapping, and nobody with a gun was close enough to shoot. Mrs. Carver was running behind the dog with her skirts hiked up, a' screaming for her baby, but she had to know, just like the rest of us did, nobody was going to get there in time to stop that damned dog from getting him.

Then we heard this voice that sounded as loud as a rooster crowing: "Run to me, boy! Run to me!"

We looked and there stood Granny O'Donnel in the middle of the road, that rosary in her hands. That boy swerved and run towards her, that mad dog right after him. When he reached her, he threw his arms around her and buried his face in her skirts, and she yelled something, snapped her arms down between him and that dog, her cat's cradle open between her hands. That dog ran his head right into it, and he just kept going, right into that cat's cradle. It was like he was running through a doorway only nothing was coming out the other side; he was just gone. The last we saw of him was the tip of his tail going into the strings before she snapped it out straight, patted the boy on the head, and that was that.

"Don't you worry about it, honey," she told him as she hugged him up to her. "I sent that ol' dog where bad things belong."

We had always respected her before, but after that, folks around here walked pretty doggone softly around Granny O'Donnel.

Like I said though, that only went for folks around here; them from outside didn't know her, or they wouldn't have tried what they did.

It's a hell of a thing to live on your land for generations, to have your kin buried there from as far back as anyone remembers, only to find out you don't own it no more. We learned that when some fellow who called himself "Mr. Campbell of the Campbell Mining Company" showed up one day in a big fancy car, with a whole string of workers, trucks, and bulldozers, plus a bunch of hired mine guards with Army rifles and machine guns. They come up to the edge of town like a big parade, but they weren't there to celebrate, no sir.

We was all going to have to move, they said, so Mr. Campbell could dig his mine right here where out town set. They said it was him that owned the mineral rights, and they told us to get out.

Well sir, we told him he'd better go sink his mine somewhere else cause we wasn't leaving. The mine guards said they'd arrest us all, or shoot us if it came to that, and Mr. Campbell threatened to bulldoze the houses with us in them. Some of the men came running with their own rifles, and it was just a matter of time till folks started getting killed.

Nobody saw her come, but all of a sudden Granny O'Donnel was there, standing right between us and them Campbell Mine folks with her rosary in her hand. I've never seen a worse look on a human face before or since. She was madder than anybody here could remember, and she looked at him like a sow bear protecting her cubs.

"Git – now!"

Mr. Campbell and his hired thugs looked at that bent little old woman and did something mighty, mighty foolish: they laughed right in her face. Well sir, her cheeks turned dark and her black eyes flashed like they were reflecting lightning bolts, and those of us who were there won't ever forget what happened next.

When she snapped that cat's cradle out, we figured we'd see them Campbell all men go down in a row like you'd cut them off at the ankles with a scythe. Instead, something came out of that cat's cradle this time, something big and black that got bigger and blacker the further it stretched.

You ever see a cat reaching for something in a crack or behind a door, how he brings them claws out and hooks his paw, trying to drag it back to him? Well that's just what this looked like: a black cat's paw, only it was bigger and blacker than a thousand cats, and it stank of brimstone. It was only a big around as the distance between her hands when it came out of the cradle, but it widened as it stretched down the road, spreading out overtop of their heads like a black storm cloud. And then that paw came down and covered the road and the whole bunch of them. That was when they started to scream, and it sounded like hogs being slaughtered. Just like a cat's paw, it came raking back, and sucked itself right back into that cat's cradle in less time than it takes to talk about it. We still heard the screaming until Granny O'Donnel snapped that rosary out straight, and then it cut off sharp, not even an echo.

We looked down the road, and there wasn't anything there; Mr. Campbell and all his men and guns and machines were just gone, as if they had never been.

We all turned to look at Granny O'Donnel, and she just took a puff on her pipe and smiled that big gummy smile while the smoke swirled up around her face.

“They won’t be coming back to bother y’all no more; I sent ‘em where bad things belong.”

I reckon she must have too, because, you know, they never did come back.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Being an author is a strange experience; it's also occasionally a frightening one whenever I realize that all this stuff came from inside my head. I tell myself it's a do-it-yourself exorcism; dragging my inner demons out kicking and screaming from inside, and pinning them writhing to the paper like ebony black butterflies. If I keep telling myself that long enough, I may even come to believe it.

Just kidding. Heh, heh, heh...

A common question I'm asked is, "Where do you come up with this stuff?" I wish I knew; perhaps then I could write a book on abnormal psychology. It's just there, and sometimes it just *comes*, be it in a sudden flash of inspiration, the logical progression of a seemingly innocuous idea, or occasionally even in a dream. I'm no different than you in that regard; the darkness is inside everyone to some degree. Darkness is shadow; you may hide it behind carefully locked doors or drive it into the corners with bright lights, but it remains. It's patient, and it waits for the chance to manifest itself, and how you express it makes all the difference in the world. You see, darkness, like light, must be shared, one way...or another.

Many people malign horror writers as wackos, but trust me; expressing the darkness on paper is an act of perfect, reasoned sanity: one much, much better than the alternative methods we see headlining the news everyday. Our species, like any other, is designed to deal with stress directly and violently, by either fight or flight. The Bible tells us that the natural man is no different than a beast, and this is obviously very true. Like that beast, he may hide his darkness behind a mask, or submerge it in reaction of the conditioning collars and leashes imposed by religion and society, but inside he remains what he is; the leopard doesn't change his spots. Every man occasionally hears the call of the wild, the howl of the dark, and the more stress he's under, the louder and more insistent its voice becomes. How he handles it – *if* he handles it – may well depend on if he has been releasing the pressure of the darkness that has built up inside him in a harmless, vicarious way, such as on paper: writing it or reading about it. Horror is the private room,

the secret chamber, where the mask can come off for a while, and the pressure valve can be cracked just a wee bit.

Just don't forget to close it again and put your mask back on before leaving, or you might become the inspiration for a story...

